

Original Work: noprops
Author: Kenji Kuroda
Illustrations: Karin Suzuragi

Ao Oni



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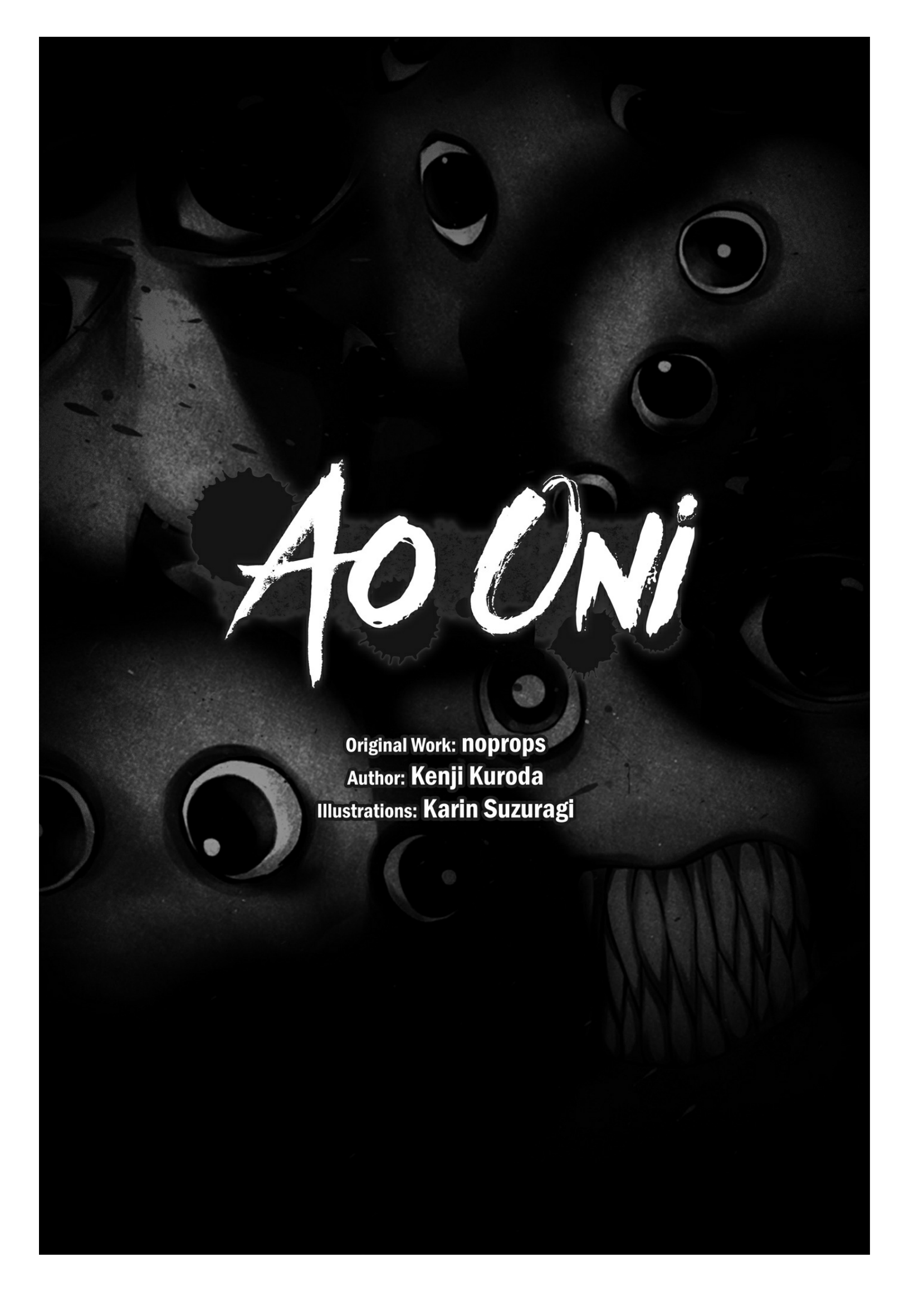


Illustration by Karin Suzuragi





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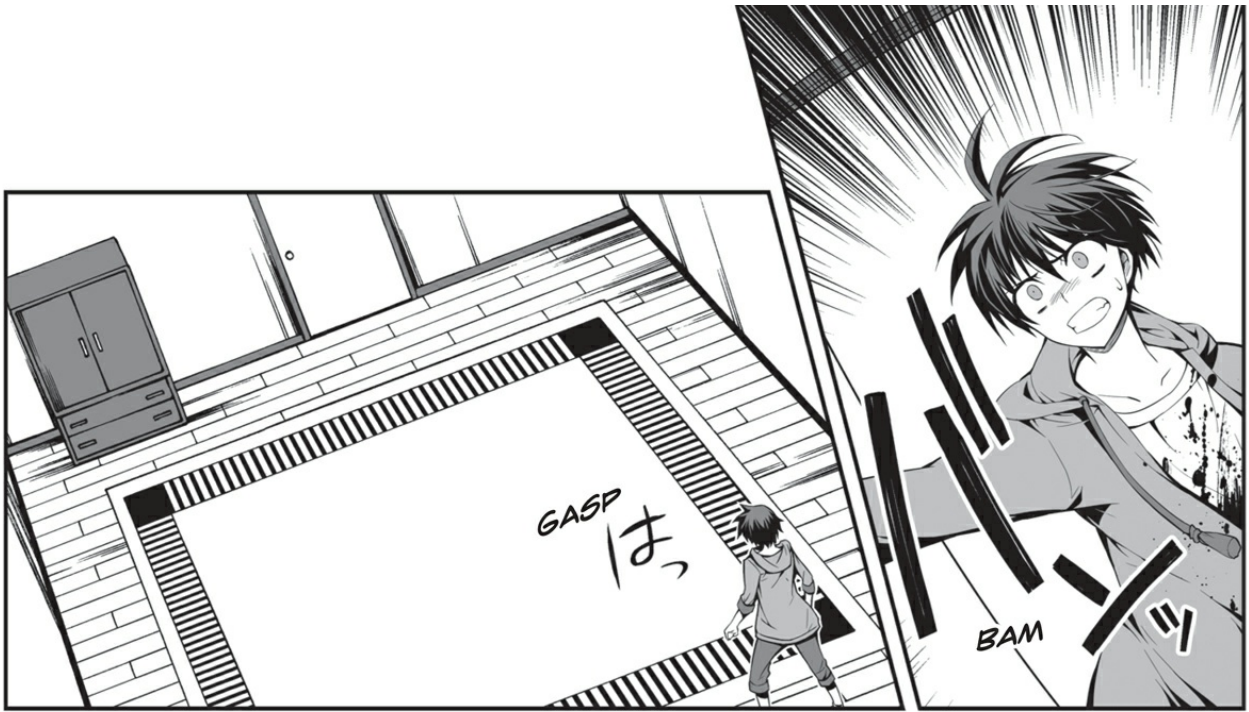
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I LIKED
HER. I
LOOKED UP
TO HER.



ANNA.



BUT
NOW...

I WAS SO
HAPPY WE
WERE
GROWING
CLOSER,
LITTLE BY
LITTLE.







IT'S
HERE!



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Chapter 1

GAME OVER

1

A flurry of fanfare resounded as the word “clear” flashed across his laptop screen.

“Done,” Hiroshi commented in his usual monotone voice as he pushed up his glasses.

“...What did you think?” Shun asked, cautiously studying Hiroshi’s face.

It was no easy feat to glean even a glimpse of emotion from Hiroshi’s perpetually calm and cool demeanor.

“It’s done well. The controls feel all right, and the graphics and sound suit the ambiance of the world perfectly. I didn’t expect it to be so polished. It was so fun that I was able to fully immerse myself in it.”

“Really?”

“Can you think of a reason why I should lie to you?”

Hiroshi looked at Shun quizzically. He certainly wasn’t the type of person to butter someone up or feign praise just to cheer them up.

Nestled among the rising hills behind the school was a small marsh. It was the only place Shun felt like he could relax. It had been almost a month since he’d moved to town, but his introverted nature kept him from talking to his classmates. He still hadn’t managed to fit in as part of the class yet. It made school days long and exhausting, and Shun knew that going home and letting his mother see his haggard face would only make her worry needlessly. That’s why he came out into the hills after class instead. He used the time to focus on finding and fixing bugs in the computer games he made.

With the cold air and the desolate scenery, no one else ever came out to the marsh. The area was even surrounded by conifer trees, so it afforded a certain degree of privacy. Shun could be alone and relax without worrying about anyone else. That is, until Hiroshi had appeared in this sacred sanctuary a week ago.

Shun had been sitting by the marsh like normal, typing away at his laptop, when all of a sudden the bushes parted and Hiroshi walked out of them. His pale skin and sharp features strongly reminded Shun of a Northern European actor. Shun had recognized him immediately. The scrutinizing look in his eyes, the self-assured way he pushed up his glasses... It was all unmistakably Hiroshi.

“...Huh?”

The way he had looked, however, was quite a shock. Beneath Hiroshi's calm exterior was a brain moving at a million miles an hour. He was capable of going toe-to-toe with the teachers in logic battles, and he often came out on top. Everyone thought he was the most mature student in class. Yet the boy standing before Shun now had a bug cage hanging from his neck and a bug net gripped tightly in his right hand. Standing there like that in his school uniform, he looked like a child.

“Have you spotted any *Curetis acuta* around here?” Hiroshi asked without batting an eyelid when he spotted Shun.

“*Curetis*... what?”

“It's a butterfly with orange wings. Because of its color, it's more commonly known as the angled sunbeam... Did one not fly by here?”

Prattling on about butterflies, Hiroshi readied his bug net like a sword and scanned the area.

“There are butterflies out in this cold?” Shun asked.

“I believe it's an extremely rare occurrence, but it's not out of the question. The *Curetis acuta* can survive the winter in its adult form, you see. And we've had some warm weather recently, so one may have mistaken it for a sign of spring and woken up early.... Oh, is that a computer?” Hiroshi tossed aside his net and jogged over to Shun. “If you're online, may I please borrow it? I'd like to confirm if what I saw was actually a *Curetis acuta*.”

Without waiting for a response, he peered over at Shun's laptop.

“U-Um...”

Shun was so nervous that his tongue felt like it was made of lead, but he

couldn't help it. He'd never even seen Hiroshi up close before. His skin was so porcelain that it looked like he was wearing makeup, and his eyelashes were exceptionally long. He looked like a china doll.

"Sorry, I'm not online," he finally managed to get out.

But Hiroshi's interest had already moved on to something else.

"This is that 'escape game' you can play online for free, right?" he asked, drawing closer to the screen.

"Huh? You know this game?"

"Yes. I stumbled upon it one night and it was so shockingly interesting that I stayed up all night playing it. It's quite addictive. I think I've played it over ten times now. Are you a fan of this game too? Wait, this seems a little different from the version I played."

"I'm trying to fix some of the stuff I didn't like about the previous version. I was thinking of uploading it again once I fixed all the bugs..."

"Huh? Are you telling me you made this game?"

Visibly surprised, Hiroshi pushed up his glasses and stared at Shun. It was the first time Shun had ever seen emotion break through Hiroshi's ordinarily reserved expression. A little hesitant, Shun nodded meekly.

"What a surprise. I never would have expected such an amazing student to be in our class."

Shun reflexively looked down at the ground at Hiroshi's compliment. He wasn't used to being praised like that. His cheeks burned with embarrassment and he squirmed uncomfortably.

"I'd had my suspicions about you. You have calluses on your thumbs and pointer fingers, don't you? From their size and position, I'd judged you to be a gamer."

Shun was taken aback by Hiroshi's powers of observation and deduction. Not only had he noticed the callouses on his hands, but he was able to figure out what that meant.

"May I play your game for a bit?"

“Oh... Sure. I don’t mind.”

“Thank you kindly. Well, here we go.”

Hiroshi plopped down, moved the laptop onto his lap, and began tapping away on the keyboard. His thin, pale fingers ran across the keys like he was playing a piano.

“What about the butterfly?” Shun asked, sitting next to him and watching the screen.

Hiroshi jumped right into the game, not bothering to look at the help screen. It appeared he’d told the truth about playing the game multiple times already, because he seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

“Finding a *Curetis acuta* in winter is certainly tempting, but it’s not something that has the power to keep me up all night.”

Shun’s cheeks burned again. He was squirming too, but he wasn’t unhappy. There was a faint warmth blooming in his chest.

“Argh, he got me!” Hiroshi shouted.

The laptop screen faded to black as the words “game over” appeared.

“The enemy’s movements have gotten more complicated compared to the last version. This is difficult.”

Their reflections shimmered on the dark screen. Shun was surprised to see himself smiling. How long had it been since he last smiled?

“Do you always come here after school? I’d like to play again if you’ll let me. I swear I’ll clear it next time,” Hiroshi had asked as they both headed home.

And so Shun had seen him almost every evening since. Hiroshi would play Shun’s game in silence. Neither one of them would speak, but for Shun, that was ideal. He wasn’t good at communicating with others. Just opening his mouth made him nervous. Not that he could ever think of anything to say.



“Oh, shoot. It’s pretty late.” His gaze dropping to his watch, Hiroshi hurriedly stood up. “I was so engrossed in the game that I forgot about my plans tonight.”

“You’re leaving already?”

Shun’s chest suddenly hurt. It shocked him to realize it was loneliness gripping his heart. Now that Hiroshi had cleared the game, he’d probably never come back to the marsh. Shun would go back to being alone after school again.

Pain welled up in the back of his throat. If he let down his guard, there would be nothing to stop the tears from falling. Shun didn’t hate being alone. In fact, it was easiest to be alone. So why was he feeling this way?

“Well, goodbye.”

Hiroshi brushed off the leaves stuck to his uniform and peered at Shun’s face from directly in front of him. The almond-shaped eyes behind those glasses made Shun nervous, so he instinctively straightened his posture.

“I ought to thank that *Curetis acuta*,” Hiroshi commented, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Huh?”

“If I hadn’t been chasing after it, I never would have discovered you here. I never would have known you were the creator of this game, and I never would have gotten to play the new version as you watched.”

Shun was stunned into silence.

“If you make a new game, please let me play it,” Hiroshi continued.

“S-Sure...”

“Actually, you inspired me to start making my own game.” Rubbing the underside of his nose, Hiroshi looked a little embarrassed. “But it was harder than I expected... Would you mind if I came to you for advice while I’m working on it?”

“Of course not. Thank you.”

Shun couldn’t hide his surprise at how naturally the words “thank you” slipped out.

“Why are you thanking me? That’s just weird.”

Hiroshi shrugged, raised his right hand in a wave, bid Shun farewell, and then quickly disappeared into the bushes.

I’m the one who should thank the Curetis acuta.

Shun looked up at the sky as evening set in, his heart fluttering with a happiness he hadn’t felt in a long time. At the same time, a vague unease bubbled up inside him. He knew why. For every instance of fortune, there were ten instances of misfortune just waiting to pounce. That was how things had always been. He had no reason to think things would change just because he’d moved to a new town.

Suddenly there was a rustle in the shrubbery even though there was no breeze.

“Hiroshi? Did you forget something—” Shun began, then froze.

“Hey, new kid.”

The boy who emerged from the bushes was a classmate he’d seen a thousand times before. But it wasn’t Hiroshi.

“What’re you doing out here?”

Shun wanted to run, but he couldn’t move. It was as if he’d been petrified by Medusa’s gaze.

“Hey. Say something, why don’t you?”

Takuro—Shun’s worst nightmare—fussed with his bangs that were draped across his cheek as he approached.

2

Dark clouds began to form in Shun's heart. A series of spasms took over his right eyelid. His legs shook heavily, threatening to give way at any moment. Soon he succumbed, sinking to his knees. The shiba inu keychain hanging from his shoulder bag jangled, ringing like a bell.

"What is it, new kid? At least answer me."

A nasty smile crept across Takuro's lips. Unable to meet his gaze any longer, Shun turned away. His heart was pounding. Cold sweat dripped down his temples.

"Lately you and Hiroshi have been sneaking off together somewhere after school, which made me super curious. What have you two been up to? I finally decided to follow you and find out. You had no idea, did you?"

Shun couldn't answer.

"You didn't say anything to him, did you?"

Shun vigorously shook his head. There was no way he could do something like that.

"The hell, man? You're shaking. You feeling sick or something?"

Shun felt his chest getting tighter and tighter. It was hard to breathe.

"Oh, I get it. You're so happy to see me after school that you can't even speak, huh? Aw, shucks. You like me that much, huh? Well, fine. I guess I'll play with you a little."

Before Takuro even finished his sentence, a rough blow struck Shun on the back of the head. Unable to brace himself, he landed face first in the dirt.

"Remember in geography class how we learned about cultures that practice geophagia? I just couldn't believe it, man. I mean, it's dirt you're eating. There's no way that tastes good. But I have to admit I am curious. So, new kid... Test it out for me, will you?"

Takuro ground his shoe into Shun's head. His cheek scraped against the

ground. The taste of blood spread through his mouth, but he felt no pain. Only fear and shame rose in his gut. At some point while putting up with Takuro's incessant bullying, Shun had learned to shut off all emotion.

Takuro was the soccer team's star player and the most popular kid in class. He was good-looking too, and rumor had it he'd even been scouted by a talent agency. On top of that, his father was the president of the hardware store company "Smile," which had over a hundred large stores across the country. He was essentially the textbook definition of perfect. But growing up having absolutely everything had warped his personality in a strange way. Something sinister hid behind that charming face of his.

Shun couldn't even remember what exactly had started all the bullying. It was probably something petty like Takuro breaking a mechanical pencil he'd borrowed from Shun, or accidentally smacking him in the face while he was horsing around with his friends. Takuro, sick of wearing the mask of a star student, saw a kid like Shun, who was so meek that he simply smiled when someone broke his stuff or hurt him for no reason, as the ultimate plaything.

Day by day, Takuro's treatment of him worsened. First it was jokes. Then it was verbal abuse. Then it was hitting. Then, finally, torture. He'd call Shun out to the gym storehouse or the back of school, places where no one would see them, and say, "Now, let us begin the experiment," in a mock teacher-like tone before making Shun drink a laxative or extinguishing cigarettes on his bare skin. Each time, he delighted in Shun's reaction. He was exactly like a young child picking off the wings and legs of an insect out of morbid curiosity.

This true nature of his, which allowed him to hurt others with a sick smile on his face, frightened Shun, but he hadn't the courage to fight back. After all, this was only temporary. Surely Takuro would grow bored soon. All Shun had to do was bear it for a little while. It would undoubtedly be more dangerous to ask an adult for help and risk angering Takuro. That's what Shun believed.

But he was naive. Takuro's twisted experiments grew more and more sadistic, and their depravity ate away at Shun's soul just as much as his body. His heart was on the verge of breaking. But no matter what happened to him, he took it with a tired smile. As the injustices mounted, he became completely accustomed to suppressing all emotion.

However, that negative energy had nowhere to go. Shun had no release for it. Eventually, as he continued to grin and bear it, that energy would reach critical mass and explode. One night, Takuro summoned him to school in the middle of the night and asked him to jump from the third floor. Thinking it would be easier just to die right then and there, Shun bolted to the window and jumped right out.

He had seriously intended to die that night. But despite his wishes, that was the night Shun learned how surprisingly sturdy the human body could be. Some shrubbery broke his fall, and the only real injury he sustained was a sprained left ankle. He'd hoped by falling asleep right there that he'd freeze to death, but someone must have called an ambulance. In the end, he didn't even catch a cold. Sometimes he still wondered about that night. If he'd actually died, would Takuro have felt even the slightest bit guilty?

"Come on, try some. Taste it for me!"

Takuro bent down next to Shun, scooped up the dirt in front of him with his right hand, and flashed his twisted smile.

"You don't look so good. I've got the perfect thing for you. Dirt is filled with minerals. This'll definitely make you healthy again."

Grabbing the back of Shun's head with his other hand, Takuro shoved the wet dirt in his mouth. Shun hadn't planned to fight back. He didn't have any energy left for that. But as the clumps of grit that smelled like they'd come from a drainage ditch entered his mouth, he couldn't help gagging and coughing. Mud sputtered from his mouth and splattered on Takuro's face.

"What the hell, man? That's disgusting."

For a narcissist like Takuro, there was nothing he hated more than having his face dirtied. His eyes began to twitch.

"Who do you think you are?" Takuro growled.

He kicked Shun in the forehead, knocking him over onto his back with a thud. The force caused him to drop the laptop he'd been clinging to his chest so tightly. Panicking, he tried to grab it, but Takuro beat him to it by a hair.

“Oh. Well, look what we have here. Let me borrow this, will you?”

Takuro picked up the laptop and violently hit the enter key.

“...Stop it,” Shun rasped weakly. “Give it back.”

I don't care what you do to me. I can take being hit and kicked, but keep your hands off my laptop. All of my code is there.

“Oh. What's this? A game?”

Takuro licked his lips with his long tongue, staring at the laptop screen greedily.

“An escape game, huh? Well, well. Looks interesting.”

He smiled again, then began to play.

“Please... Give it back.”

It was all Shun could do to eke out those words. He didn't have the strength to fight back. But looking at Takuro's eyes, his whole body shivered unconsciously. Suddenly, Takuro's hands stopped.

“What's the meaning of this, new kid?” He glared at Shun grimly. “Did you make this? You little turd!”

Takuro threw the laptop against the ground as he yelled. It broke in half, sending tons of little pieces flying everywhere.

“Ah...”

Shun tried to pick up the remains of his laptop, but instead took a swift kick to the gut. There was a searing pain. Doubled over, he cowered in place. Acid from his stomach burst from his mouth and spilled onto the back of his hand.

“New kid. I see what you really think of me now,” Takuro spat, straddling Shun's back. “I felt bad because you didn't have any friends, so I was going to be your first. I never would have imagined you'd betray me like this. Man, what a shame. I feel like I've been stabbed in the back here.”

Shun felt his jacket pull tight against his throat. Unable to breathe, his body instinctually bucked. It was enough to knock Takuro off of his back.

“Hey, what the hell? You got my clothes all dirty,” Takuro complained, his

voice quivering as he tried to wipe the mud off his jacket.

“S-Sorry.”

“You’re gonna have to pay for this to be dry-cleaned. Come on, pay up. I bet you have a huge allowance, seeing as how you walk around with that laptop.”

“I’m sorry... I don’t have any money.”

“Don’t lie to me. It’s in here, isn’t it?”

Takuro ripped Shun’s shoulder bag away from him and started rifling through it.

“Stop it. That’s...”

“The hell? It’s full of garbage. You’re so boring.”

Takuro snorted and threw the bag into the marsh.

“No!”

“Bring me twenty thousand yen tomorrow for my cleaning bill. Got it?”

Takuro barked, fixing his messy hair with his fingers. “Hey. You listening to me, new kid?”

Shun could hear him just fine, but he was unable to answer. It was all he could do to continue watching with disbelief as his bag slowly sank to the bottom of the marsh. Crushing despair threatened to consume him.

...No more...

Shun mustered up all his strength and screamed as loud as he could. What he screamed, he had no idea. All he could process was the look of surprise on Takuro’s face and the sight of his bag disappearing into the marshy water. Shun could feel yet another sense of loss worming its way into the depths of his heart.

Oh...

An empty sigh slipped from his lips. Something inside his body burst. The next moment, a world of dark, swirling despair swallowed him whole.

Chapter 2

KIMON

Jailhouse

- 1.) In onmyo, the unlucky direction through which demons travel; north
- 2.) Casually, a place where nothing good happens, or a person or thing that makes one uncomfortable

1

The recent pleasantly warm weather couldn't hide the fact that it was the dead of winter. The temperature dropped quickly as evening set in, and the north wind mercilessly assaulted the people hurrying home.

"Ugh, so cold."

Shun lifted his head upon hearing a familiar voice and looked around. The sun was sinking low on his right over the giant chemical plant, now three years abandoned. The place was silent and still, as if frozen in time. Wandering aimlessly, he'd somehow ended up on the edge of town.

On the other side of the abandoned plant—Shun's left-hand side—towered a wall easily taller than a castle wall. Aside from the metal gate, the wall was made of stone. It stretched to the next crossing on either side, and the area it encompassed was larger than the property Shun's middle school sat on. The wall itself seemed quite old and was falling apart in places. Random graffiti covered it here and there, but it was just a jumble of spray-painted letters that made no sense to anyone. Cigarette butts and empty beer cans were carelessly cast aside along the road next to the wall. The lack of foot traffic here made it a prime gathering spot for delinquents. Barbed wire was wound around the top of the wall, possibly in an attempt to discourage that kind of thing and make it harder to illegally trespass.

While dazed and staring at the graffiti on the stone wall, Shun heard a loud sneeze. Focusing his eyes, he looked around. About twenty meters from where he was standing, he could see two figures sitting in front of the arch-shaped gate.

"Hey. Why do you think Takuro called us out here?"

"I dunno."

"He didn't tell you anything?"

"Nope. Nothing. He called me out of the blue, just like you, and told me to come. That's not so odd, is it? He's always doing stuff like this on a whim."

A short, blond boy—Takeshi—shivered from the cold while sipping canned coffee. Next to him was a girl—Mika—who had a very irritated look on her face. Shun knew them both from school.

Takeshi was the class clown who was always saying something stupid to get people to laugh. His parents ran a restaurant, so he was extremely picky with his food and often complained about the school lunches. He loved milk and drank upwards of two bottles a day, yet he didn't seem to grow at all. Mika, on the other hand, was so attractive that it was hard to believe she was in middle school. It seemed everyone in class had a crush on her, but she had a tendency to look down on others.

Shun had always been intensely introverted, but he found it especially difficult to deal with these two since they often hung out with Takuro.

“Urgh...”

He moaned a little and clutched at his abdomen. Just the thought of Takuro sent sharp pain shooting through his stomach all over again. Since Takeshi and Mika were friends with Takuro, Shun wanted to avoid them if at all possible. Fortunately they seemed not to have noticed him, so he slipped into the shadow of the abandoned plant and peered over at them. Takeshi was apparently very cold. He had on a down jacket on top of multiple layers. Mika was the opposite, wearing only a thin coat over a camisole.

“Mika, do you know what time it is?” Takeshi asked as he crushed the empty coffee can in his right hand.

“Don't you have a watch? It's almost five,” Mika answered, fidgeting with the hem of her shorts.

“I'd like to go home by six,” said Takeshi.

“I see,” Mika replied.

“We have two reservations at the restaurant tonight, which never happens. My mom was insistent that I help out.”

“Then why don't you tell Takuro that?” Mika's displeased expression seemed unlikely to abate any time soon. Her tone was also quite curt.

“No way. How could I? There’s no telling what he’d do if I went against him.” Playing with the suspenders hanging lazily from his cargo pants, Takeshi’s thin lips formed a pout.

“True. Takuro needs a replacement for Naoki, after all.”

...Naoki?

Shun knew that name, and his heart skipped a beat when he heard it. Last December, before Shun had moved to town, Naoki Ohashi had been hit by a truck and died.

“What’re you gonna do, Takeshi? You could end up his next target.”

“Oh, no need to worry about that. It looks like Takuro has already found a replacement,” Takeshi said, throwing the crushed, empty can onto the roadside.

“A replacement? Who?”

“Huh, I figured you already knew. It’s the new kid. Uh, what was his name?”

“Shun?”

“Yeah, him. Takuro’s been sneaking off with him during breaks and stuff lately. Takuro wouldn’t leave a mark on him somewhere visible, so I doubt anyone else has noticed, but that’s got to be what’s going on.”

“Now that you mention it, he did have a bandage on his ankle last week. Could that have been...”

“Yeah, it was probably Takuro’s handiwork.” Takeshi gave a small shrug. “At least it isn’t me.”

The corners of his lips drew up in a smile. Seeing that made Shun a little dizzy. His stomach made a strange sound like a dog growling. He felt awful. He wanted to throw up. Unable to stand any longer, he sank to the ground. It didn’t help at all.

Curled up there, a few minutes passed before he heard a sound in the distance like the spinning of a hamster wheel. Turning his head to look, he saw a hand truck carrying three cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other slowly approaching. Printed on the side of each box was the name of Takuro’s

father's hardware store. Shun had a bad feeling about this.

He held his breath, waiting for the hand truck to pass in front of him. Just as he thought, Takuro was the one pushing it. He was wearing a different jacket from the one he'd had on earlier in the hills behind the school. He must've run home to change. Big beads of sweat dripped from his cheeks as he pushed the massive load along. His breathing was quite ragged as well.

A look of displeasure and anger was plastered across Takuro's entire face. It was quite clear he was irritated at having to do something so bothersome. Shun couldn't allow himself to be found. Holding his breath, he patiently persevered until Takuro was gone.

2

“Oh, you’re finally here.”

Mika stood up, noticing the hand truck approaching them. Her inner thighs were a little numb from sitting on the cold asphalt for so long.

“You took your sweet time.”

The stack of cardboard boxes obscured Takuro from view, but she recognized the Smile store logo on the boxes. It was definitely Takuro behind them.

“Jeez. How long were you gonna make us wait?” she asked as she jogged up to the hand truck.

“Yo,” Takuro greeted her.

He was wearing a fashionable combination of a parka-like jacket and corduroy pants. The smell of bergamot wafted from his soft hair. Mika recognized it. It was the scented hair oil she’d given him for his birthday.

“What’s with all this stuff? What in the world are we doing?”

“Sorry. Can you guys help me carry it inside?” Takuro asked, nodding toward the stone wall.

“Inside? You don’t mean inside the Jailhouse, do you?”

Everyone in town called the giant mansion inside these walls the Jailhouse. Mika had never understood why people called it that until she came here herself. The stone walls three times her height surrounding the place certainly made it look like a prison.

“H-Hey. You’re not serious about sneaking into the Jailhouse... right?” Takeshi asked, the panic audible in his voice. “A monster lives here. If you go in there, you never come out. Tons of people have already gone missing—”

“You still believe that crap when you’re in eighth grade? So stupid. It’s obviously made up.”

“It’s not. I’ve heard people at our restaurant talk about it. Years ago, a friend of a friend of some guy snuck into the Jailhouse on a dare and was never seen

again.”

“A friend of a friend, huh? That just reeks of hearsay,” Takuro snorted and smiled.

“But—” Takeshi tried to argue.

“Even if that story is true,” Takuro cut him off to say, “there’s no proof he was attacked by a monster. He could have run away from home or gotten involved in something criminal, so someone made it seem like the work of a monster.”

“You mean like with Naoki?”

“Hey, didn’t I tell you never to bring that up again?”

Takuro’s expression turned dark. Normally he had the eyes of a friendly puppy, but every now and again the slightest thing would cause his real personality to shine through. His sharp, malicious glare shut Takeshi up in an instant. It was only natural. Anyone would flinch at a glare like that, even if they weren’t a coward like Takeshi.

“I, like, totally don’t believe in the monster rumors either.”

Mika intervened as Takuro was about to grab Takeshi. She wasn’t exactly saving him. She just didn’t want to waste time on stupid fights. That was all.

“But isn’t it still a bad idea to sneak in? That’s breaking and entering, right? It could be a real pain if anyone found out.”

The moment she said that, a certain thought crossed Mika’s mind.

If I got arrested, would mommy and daddy worry about me a little?

“Stupid. Who said anything about sneaking in?” Takuro said with a sly grin.

“Huh? We’re not?”

“This is my house.”

Stroking his bangs, Takuro puffed out his chest proudly and retrieved an old key from his jacket pocket. The key looked like an antique, and had a head shaped like a four-leaf clover. Possibly made of brass, it shone gold as it reflected the evening sun.

“My dad bought this place,” Takuro explained as he turned away from the

others and inserted the key into the hole in the sturdy-looking iron gate. “He was planning to build a new store here eventually. Told me it’d be mine once I graduated college.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Mika remarked in honest awe.

“Don’t be stupid,” Takuro said with a long face. “An out-of-the-way place like this would never get any customers.”

“Oh. Well, I guess...”

“I told him it was bound to be a failure, but my dad seems to have some kind of plan. Maybe he’s gonna make a haunted house instead of a hardware store.”

The click of the key turning in the lock echoed. Takuro tried to push the gate open, but the hinges were so rusty that it refused to budge.

“Hey, help me out here!” he barked at Takeshi, who was standing there with his hands in his jacket pockets and spacing out.

“Oh, sorry,” Takeshi apologized as he hurried over to Takuro.

“Mmmmrgh!”

The two boys pushed on the gate so hard that veins were visibly bulging from their temples. Mika, arms crossed, watched them struggle. Physical exertion wasn’t her thing, even if Takuro asked her for help. The heaviest thing she was interested in lifting was her Persian cat, Heart.

“Okay, I get this is your dad’s land... But why are we here?” she asked.

“My dad asked me a favor. We’re starting remodeling next week, so he wanted me to bring this stuff over. Come on, Takeshi, put your back into it!”

“I am!”

Takuro lightly poked Takeshi in the head, and he let out a pitiful squeal in response.

“I managed to get this far with the hand truck, but the boxes have to be carried the rest of the way and I can’t do that by myself. That’s why I called you guys for help.”

“Takeshi can carry the boxes. My job is chatting with you.”

“Yeah, that was my plan from the beginning.”

“Hold on. You want me to carry this in by myself?”

“Hey! Don’t slack off, idiot.”

Takeshi hung his head as Takuro snapped at him.

“It’s not really like you to help out your dad,” Mika commented.

Her tone was rather thorny, though that wasn’t her intention. She wasn’t sure why it had come out that way herself. Maybe it was because she was jealous of Takuro for being able to help out his dad with work.

“What’s wrong with that?” Takuro asked in a slightly lower voice. He must have sensed the animosity behind her words.

“Nothing.”

“So you pretend to be a good boy even in front of your parents, huh?” she almost said, but she managed to hold herself back.

I know a side of Takuro even his parents don’t. He can be his real self with me. That’s good enough, right?

The last thing she wanted to do was anything that might jeopardize her comfortable relationship with him.

As Mika was thinking, the iron gate stubbornly creaked open. Beyond the overgrown weeds stood a giant Western-style mansion the likes of which she’d only seen in movies.

3

After confirming that Takuro, Takeshi, and Mika had disappeared beyond the gate, Shun emerged from the shadows of the abandoned plant and walked over to where they'd been standing. The empty can Takeshi had tossed on the ground rolled over to his foot, blown by the wind. Peering through the gap they'd finally managed to open in the gate—wide enough for one person at a time to slide through—he spotted the three of them walking toward the mansion. The weeds seemed to be giving them a tough time with the hand truck.

“Hey, idiot. I said put your back into it!” Takuro jabbed at Takeshi's head over and over.

If he were over there, Shun would be the one in Takeshi's position. He was grateful they hadn't spotted him so far, but as he watched them, he quietly began following after them. When he did...

“What're you doing here?”

Someone suddenly clapped him on the shoulder from behind. Desperately holding in the urge to scream, he turned around.

There stood Anna, the class president, looking perplexed. The frills around her skirt danced in the wind.

“Wait, is the gate open? How—”

“Anna, over here.”

Grabbing her arm as she tried to peer inside, Shun once again hid himself in the shadow of the abandoned plant. Poking his head out from the darkness, he checked their surroundings. Nothing had changed. It seemed they hadn't been noticed.

“Shun... My arm.” Anna frowned, as if troubled.

Shun finally realized he was still holding on to her left arm.

“Oh, sorry!”

He quickly let go of her cream-colored cardigan.

“You scared me, just grabbing my arm and running off like that. Goodness. What in the world is going on?”

In her right hand she held a plastic handbag you couldn't really call stylish. The name of a cram school was printed across the front. She must have been on her way there. From her blouse's breast pocket hung a shiba inu keychain, swaying idly as it stared up at Shun. He had one just like it. Anna had given it to him as a present the other day. The moment his eyes fell on dog's innocent face, an intense pain assaulted his temple.

“Are you feeling sick?” Anna asked, looking at him worriedly.

“No, I'm fine.”

He shook his head slightly. The pain had already subsided.

“Uh... Um...”

He felt like he had to say something, but he was so nervous that all he could do was stammer. Not only was he super shy, but now he was in front of Anna of all people.



Anna, the class president, was the only student who'd been friendly and talked to him on his first day of school. She was also the one who taught Shun about the dip in the science room floor that was a tripping hazard, about how the English teacher would call on students based on the date, and about the hills behind the school.

"Come talk to me if you're ever in need," she'd said.

It didn't take long for him to develop special feelings for her. That lustrous hair that stretched down to her hips. The way her eyes narrowed when she smiled. The slight lisp she spoke with. The more he looked at her, the more enamored he became.

But the more he became aware of it, the more nervous he became around her. As he was now, it was practically impossible to even talk to her. He cursed himself for being so pathetic, but there was nothing he could do about his natural-born personality. Any normal girl would quickly lose interest in a guy who looked at the floor every time she talked to him, but Anna was different.

One time in class, the homeroom teacher had made a bad pun that, for some reason, Shun found so funny he did a spit take. Upon seeing this, Anna smiled happily and said to him, "Hey, you laughed. Your eyes look like a shiba inu's when you laugh. It's cute."

That was the first time a classmate had ever called him "cute." Flattered and embarrassed, he remembered being unable to concentrate for the rest of class.

"This keychain looks just like you, Shun, so I couldn't stop myself from buying it. It was a set of two, so I'll give you one," she'd said the day she gave him the keychain.

"Thanks..." His heart was about to burst, but he mustered all of his courage and replied, "I'll value it for the rest of my life."

It was the honest truth.

Anna always had a smile on her face and was kind to all. Just watching her was enough to fill Shun with happiness. But sometimes she had a dark, dead look in her eyes that made his heart hurt. The flashes of emptiness inside her smile. The tiny sighs she let slip during class. The bags under her eyes.

Surprisingly, no one else seemed to notice these changes in her. Not even the boys sitting next to her or the girls she usually chatted with offered a word of concern.

Why didn't anyone notice? Why didn't anyone ask her if something was wrong? It vexed Shun to no end, but he didn't have the guts to ask her himself. What sort of suffering was she holding inside? The curiosity got the better of him now, causing him to glance up at her from the side.

Anna was always kind to him, the new kid. He had to do something to pay her back. Yet despite his earnest feelings, his mouth stayed tightly shut like a clam.

"Um..."

He still couldn't think of anything clever to say. He nervously rubbed the underside of his nose, but still nothing came to him.

"Hm?"

Anna peered at Shun's face quizzically. He'd never seen her so close before. His anxiety ballooned and his mind went completely blank.

"Oh..."

With their faces this close together, Shun noticed that the bags under her eyes—something he ordinarily found charming about her—were darker than normal. Her eyes were also a little red.

"Have you... been crying?"

In his desperation to say something—anything—he blurted out the worst possible thing. Anna looked shocked, then put her right pinky to her eyelid.

"Oh, heh. You can tell?" she said, looking down and trying to laugh it off.

"...Did something happen?"

"Not really. There was just some dust in my eye."

Normally, Shun would have just nodded and left it at that. In fact, he thought about doing that now, but what he said next surprised even him.

"Are you sure?"

Anna blinked repeatedly and looked back at Shun with curiosity.

“What does that mean?”

“I mean, Anna... Sometimes you look a little depressed.”

Shun fidgeted nervously, unable to stop the runaway train that was his mouth. What was with him? It was like he wasn't himself. Sometimes he found himself playing the chatterbox in his dreams, so was that it? Could this be a dream? His legs were feeling light and the whole situation seemed surreal.

“Aw, you saw through me?”

Anna looked up at the sky and sighed. Her breath condensed into white vapor in the cold.

“I thought I'd already gotten over it, you know. People stopped talking to me about it, so I thought I was fine... But I guess I'm not.”

She seemed to be trying to act cheerful, but there was a pitifulness to it.

“Sorry.”

Feeling like he'd started to pry into something personal, Shun bowed his head in apology.

“Oh, right. You started during the third trimester, so you wouldn't know about the accident.”

Anna put her hands behind her and spoke quietly as if she was talking to herself as she began pacing.

“My parents died in an accident last December,” she explained as if she were reading a passage from a textbook. Perhaps that was the only way to keep her composure. “It was a Sunday, and it was snowing. We'd gone as a family to the department store and were on our way home when a truck came hurtling from the opposite lane and crashed into us as we were turning. That's when everything ended. But for some reason, I survived.”

She spoke calmly, her tone steady and body now completely still. She looked and sounded fine, but Shun knew better. He could tell something was wrong because she never once looked him in the eyes.

“It turned into a three-car pileup with seven fatalities. Everyone except me died. That’s weird, right? I was leaning forward, talking to my parents in the front seats. So why was I the only survivor? They were killed instantly, but I was unharmed. It doesn’t even sound possible, right? So why—”

“Sorry.” Unable to listen to any more, Shun apologized again. “I’m really sorry I asked something so insensitive.”

“No, it’s okay. There’s no use in crying forever. I’ve got entrance exams this year, so I have to get over it quickly.”

Anna rubbed the edges of her eyes and turned back to Shun. The evening sun obscured her face so he couldn’t see her expression, but something told him he didn’t need to see it to know how she was feeling.

“Can I ask a question now, Shun? What are you doing here? Do you know what this place is?” she asked, gazing at the stone walls.

“The Jailhouse—a mansion that’s rumored to house monsters, right?”

It was the most famous supernatural spot in town. There practically wasn’t a day that went by that one of his classmates didn’t talk about it.

Apparently twenty years ago a young couple and their wheelchair-bound daughter lived there, but they disappeared one day. The girl was extremely sensitive to ultraviolet rays, so she wore a thick coat even in the middle of summer and never revealed her bare skin. The mansion was abandoned now, but every so often you could hear creepy noises coming from the grounds. Some even claimed they’d seen monsters. Others thought the couple hadn’t moved, but rather they were so beset by their daughter’s illness that they committed suicide. Perhaps their ghosts still haunted the mansion’s halls.

There were all kinds of stories and people never seemed to stop talking about them, which is how even someone new to town like Shun knew about them. He was a bit tired of the rumor mill already.

“Oh, so you came even though you knew? Are you a fan of horror movies or something? Are you interested in the occult?”

Shun violently shook his head from side to side. Just a black cat crossing his path was enough to make him weak in the knees. He’d never even gone inside a

carnival haunted house before. If he watched a horror film, he'd surely faint.

"Then why?"

"Takuro's group is inside..."

"Takuro?"

Anna's expression stiffened instantly at the mention of his name. Pursing her lips, she stared into empty space. She almost seemed to be holding something inside.

"Is he planning something again?" Anna muttered quietly, then turned her back to the plant and began walking toward the giant gate.

"Wh-What are you going to do?" Shun asked, hurriedly following after her.

"I'm going to put a stop to his evil schemes. I don't want there to be more victims like my mom and dad," she replied forcefully, continuing to look forward.

"What are you talking about? Ah! Ow!"

Shun's nose smacked into Anna's back when she suddenly stopped. The pain caused tears to well up in his eyes.

"Hey, Shun."

Anna slowly turned around to face him and his whole body stiffened. He'd never seen that expression on her face before. Anna's lips parted slightly.

"My parents were killed by Takuro," she said, her voice quivering with rage.

Chapter 3

YUUKI

Courage

- 1.) A ghost or spirit
- 2.) A monster

1

What a creepy mansion.

Looking up at the ancient, three-story mansion, Takeshi rubbed his elbows. Underneath his thick down jacket, his arms were covered in goosebumps. If Takuro weren't there, he'd probably burst into tears and hightail it home. He was well aware of his own extreme cowardice. He especially hated ghosts, aliens, and other things related to the unknown.

And that was exactly why he'd never gotten this close to the Jailhouse before. He knew the rumors about monsters here, and he avoided the place like the plague. He'd even take the long way around when going to the arcade just beyond the Jailhouse. His hands hadn't stopped shaking since Takuro messaged him and told him to wait in front of the old mansion. He'd told Mika it was because of the cold, but that wasn't the truth. The fear was overwhelming. But that didn't mean he could disobey Takuro's orders. Something even more terrifying than ghosts awaited anyone who crossed him.

Are you kidding me?

Takeshi cursed, but he didn't dare do it out loud. He'd assumed the Jailhouse was just a temporary meet-up spot and that they'd be going to the arcade. Never in a million years would he have expected they'd be forcing their way onto the property.

If this is a dream, please let me wake up now.

Closing his eyes, he prayed with all his heart.

A new hardware store here? What an idiotic idea. Who would willingly come here to buy things? It'd never work out. He wanted to go and lecture Takuro's father right away, but he could already see him snorting in derision at the idea.

"Huh? That's odd."

Takuro, however, was currently growing increasingly frustrated trying to open the front door to the mansion. It stood tall and grand, emblazoned with reliefs. He inserted the key over and over, but to no avail.

“It’s probably the wrong key.”

“That can’t be.”

Frowning, he violently jimmied the key in the hole. The result was the same. Takeshi silently begged the door to stay closed forever.

“Ah damn it!”

Takuro suddenly kicked at the door. Takeshi ducked his head at the loud noise. Fearfully he peered at the entrance, but the heavy door showed no sign of budging. It may have been old, but it wasn’t so weakly constructed as to succumb to a kick.

“Damn it! How do we get this open?”

“Why don’t you ask your dad?”

It would be dangerous for Takuro’s mood to get any worse. Takeshi didn’t really want Takuro to call his dad, but he’d suggested it as a way to get Takuro to calm down. He was the only one in class with his own cellphone.

“Are you stupid? There’s no way that’s gonna work. I took this key without his permission.”

“Huh? But—”

Hadn’t he said his father asked him to transport the boxes to the mansion? Apparently that wasn’t the truth, but Takeshi knew pursuing the issue would only further incite Takuro’s wrath. And so he gulped hard, swallowing back his questions.

The bright red sun in the southern sky had fallen below the horizon, leaving shadows to creep over the ground in its place. As night fell, it would only get colder. Takeshi also had to help out at his family’s restaurant, so he wanted to get home as quickly as possible. Was there some way to get Takuro to relent? He wracked his brain trying to think of something as he watched the irritation on Takuro’s face grow.

“Ow!”

Mika, who had been strolling around the courtyard bored, suddenly yelped.

“Jeez, what is this?”

She ran toward the two boys with her right hand stuck out. The center of the back of her hand was red and swelling. Beads of blood were dripping from it.

“Were you stung by a bee?” Takuro asked, looking at the wound.

That couldn’t be it. It was February. Bees weren’t out this time of year.

“No, it wasn’t a bee. It was a greenish bug, like a grasshopper. It was sitting in the weeds and then suddenly jumped onto my hand...”

“Does it hurt?” Takeshi asked, grimacing.

Injections, toothaches, scrapes... He hated pain just as much as ghosts.

“I just felt a quick sting. But it won’t stop bleeding. Takuro, do you have a bandage or something?”

“Of course not,” he replied curtly, sticking his lips out.

But that wasn’t a surprise. It would have been almost out of character for Takuro to whip out a bandage or a first-aid kit.

“There’s nothing in here?”

Mika was probably more worried about blood getting on her clothes than the actual injury. Keeping her right hand extended away from her body, she attempted to open the cardboard boxes on the hand truck with her left.

“Don’t touch those!” Takuro shouted loudly.

Neither of them had expected him to yell like that. Mika froze and looked up at him blankly.

“...Don’t touch the boxes,” Takuro said simply, then looked away from Mika guiltily.

“You don’t have to get all angry at me.”

Miffed and pouting, Mika walked away from the hand truck. An awkward silence settled in over the group.

Oh, come on.

Takeshi couldn’t bear being stuck in the middle. He sighed softly, taking care

to not be heard by anyone.

“Hey, Takeshi. Go look for another entrance.”

Takuro was the one to break the silence. He glanced at Takeshi with a clearly sour look on his face.

“Oh... Okay.”

Night was settling in, increasing the creepiness of the surrounding scenery. Takeshi didn't want to be alone in this place, but there was no defying Takuro's orders. Walking away from the others, he began circling the building.

The windows, placed at regular intervals, all had sturdy-looking iron bars on them. He tried grabbing one as a test, but it wouldn't budge. Brushing off the rust stuck to his hand, he turned back toward the entrance. Takuro still hadn't given up in his battle with the front door. Mika was sitting on the stone paving in front of the entrance, hugging her knees. Her gaze was on the stack of cardboard boxes on the hand truck.

Takuro had a short temper, but he'd never let Mika see him yell before. Why had he gotten so agitated over her touching the cardboard boxes? What was in them? He'd most likely lied about them containing supplies his father sent. Takuro was probably planning something nasty, just like when Naoki died.

“What're you doing? We gotta hurry up or it'll get totally dark out.”

His thoughts were interrupted by Takuro barking at him from the entrance.

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking maybe we could break a window somehow.” Takeshi yammered off a list of excuses and turned back toward the window.

Forcing an arm through the iron bars, he wiped the windowpane with a fingertip. It dislodged several years' worth of dust, scattering it into the air and sending him into a coughing fit. He struggled to bring his face closer to the area he'd wiped clean and peer inside. There seemed to be a board nailed to the other side of the window, so he was unable to discern anything about the inside of the mansion.

The first window was a bust, so he gave up and tried the next one. It was the exact same thing. The iron bars refused to give, and wiping the glass only

revealed a board on the inside that made it impossible to see anything. All of the windows were probably like that, but the only way to know for sure was to check. Takeshi couldn't afford to be lazy under Takuro's orders, even if he knew it was all a giant waste of time. He let go of the iron bars and went to move on to the next window.

Tmp tmp tmp...

When he did, he heard the sound of someone jogging down a hall.

What was that?

Straining his eyes, he drew his face close to the window again.

Tmp tmp tmp tmp tmp...

This time he heard it clearly. There were footsteps coming from inside the mansion, going from left to right. Could it be rats? No, no way. It was something much larger. Was it a lost dog looking for food? A child, perhaps?

Takeshi ran over to the next window. It was the same as the previous ones—No, this one was slightly different. When he wiped away the dust on the windowpane with his palm, he could see some light. There appeared to be a small gap between two boards, unlike the other windows that had been boarded up completely.

But why was there light? Was a light on inside? How could that be when supposedly no one lived there? Takeshi slowly inched closer to the window. With one eye closed, he peeked through the gap. He saw something round and black on a field of blue.

...What?

When he strained to get a better look, the object appeared to swell. In the center of the black circle, Takeshi could see his reflection. Noticing what looked like capillaries surrounding it, he screamed at the top of his lungs.

It's an eye! Someone's looking at me!

"Hey, what's the matter?"

Takuro and Mika ran over to Takeshi, who had fallen backward onto the ground.

“Someone’s... Someone’s inside...”

He pointed at the window and tried to explain, but his mouth wasn’t working properly.

“I-It was g-g-glaring at me...”

“What? Are you crazy, man?” Takuro snorted derisively, then peered into the gap in the window. “It’s so dark I can’t tell what’s in there.”

“It must have run. I swear it was there when I...”

“All right, all right. I was an idiot to leave a job like this to a coward. Just shut up. We’ll get in trouble if someone hears you screaming.”

“Trouble? Why?” Mika looked to Takuro. “Didn’t your dad ask you to come here?”

As Takuro fumbled for an answer, a shrill scream rang out from behind the mansion.

“What was that?” Takuro took off, his face red.

“Wait for me!” Mika followed in pursuit.

“Ah! Don’t leave me! Wait! Wait, guys!”

Takeshi hurriedly tried to stand up, but his legs were still weak. He crawled after them as fast as he could.

2

Anna dropped her bag and, before Shun could call out to her, slipped through the gap in the gate and began running across the grounds.

“W-Wait!”

He really didn’t want to run into Takuro if he could help it. Shun considered leaving Anna to her own devices, but he summoned his courage and followed after her instead.

“My parents were killed by Takuro.”

Shun recalled Anna’s face, full of bitter pain, as she said that. What exactly that meant, he’d need to ask Anna himself. Right now he was worried she’d gone after him to take matters into her own hands.

Past the gate, a wide, untended garden spread out before him. Judging by the vast amount of weeds despite it being the dead of winter, the soil must have been exceptionally fertile.

Shun could hear Takuro and his friends discussing something in front of the giant mansion, but they were too far away to make out anything. Mostly, Shun was just glad that they hadn’t seemed to notice him and Anna entering.

“Okay, let’s go,” Anna whispered in his ear.

“What?”

Her chest rose and fell heavily like she was taking deep breaths. Both of her hands were tightly balled into fists. Shun thought she was going to just walk right up to them, but instead she stooped down and slunk alongside the stone wall.

“Ah... Wait.”

It was so unexpected that he accidentally called out to her without thinking. Perhaps sensing them, Mika turned in their direction. Their eyes locked for a moment.

Shit. I’ve been spotted.

Shun's body stiffened, but Mika continued to turn her head and yawned with boredom. The dimness of the fading sunlight must have saved him. She'd looked right his way, but apparently hadn't seen him.

"Shun, hide."

Suddenly Anna crept back over to him and yanked on his arm. Down he went, crouching next to her.

"Good. I thought we'd been spotted, but it looks like we're fine. You think she's nearsighted?" Anna sighed in relief.

"What are you going to do?" Shun asked hesitantly.

"If I confronted them directly about what they were up to, I'd never get a real answer, so I'm going to follow them and find out myself," Anna quickly replied, then began sneaking her way through the weeds.

Keeping low, Shun followed her lead. It was quite dark out now and the tall grass made for good cover. As long as they didn't make any major missteps, they would stay perfectly hidden.

"Sorry. I know you probably have better things to do," Anna whispered as she pressed forward.

"No, I'm here because I wanted to be." Shun waved his hand in objection despite the fact that Anna couldn't see it. "I'm sorry, too. I'm not a burden, am I?"

"No. It's reassuring to have you here. Thanks."

Warmth blossomed in Shun's heart. He didn't care if it was a lie. Those words alone made him feel like he could find meaning in his existence.

"Is school getting any better for you?" she asked.

"No, not at all. I'm a terrible talker, so... I'm not great at making friends."

"That's not true. See? You're talking with me just fine."

That's because you're special.

For some reason, Shun's cheeks burned.

The two of them proceeded forward carefully, doing their best to avoid detection. It was harder than he'd expected to walk bent over, especially for someone like him who usually spent all day on his computer. He stopped for a small break and looked ahead, rubbing his hips. It was then that he spotted a suspicious figure sneaking around toward the back of the mansion. He was confident in his eyesight. There was no mistaking what he saw.

"There was someone there just now, right?"

Anna stopped and turned around. She looked frightened. Shun nodded, which seemed to relieve her.

"Hey, do you have a strong sixth sense by any chance?"

The sudden question caught him off guard.

"No way," he laughed.

There was no such thing as ghosts. They were just silly fantasies people had.

"Oh, good. That means that thing we saw just now wasn't supernatural, right?" Anna sighed with relief, then began hurrying forward again.

"H-Hold on!" Confused, Shun called out to her. "Do you... have a sixth sense?"

He was hoping she'd burst into laughter and tell him he was silly, but she nodded without even looking back.

"You might think me a weirdo for saying this, but..."

She looked hesitant to say any more.

"Maybe it's because I took a tiny step into the world beyond, but ever since the accident, I... I've been able to see lots of things," she said, pushing the weeds out of her way as she went. "On my way here, I saw a headless old lady."

Shun was absolutely silent.

"Sorry, I'll stop now. You don't believe me, do you?"

"No, I do. Can you tell me more?"

Shun recalled his mother telling him a story the other day about how a 77-year-old woman broke her neck and died nearby. It was possible Anna had seen the ghost of that poor lady.

“I’d always assumed that ghosts only showed up at graves or inside tunnels. Creepy places, you know? But I was wrong. They’re actually everywhere... I’ve even seen about five at school. The ghost of a girl about our age haunts the science prep room. She’s always sitting by the model skeleton, hugging her knees and crying. I tried talking to her, but she won’t respond.” Anna suddenly hung her head. “Sorry, I know this is weird. It’s just not possible, right? There must be something wrong with my head. You think so too, right, Shun?”

“Oh, no...”

Shun didn’t know what to say. Whatever he said would just sound shameless.

“I’m really sorry. I’ve never told anyone any of this before... What’s with me?”

Anna’s voice trembled. Was she crying? Shun wanted to check, but he couldn’t see her face with her back turned toward him.

Once they’d gotten past Takeshi, who’d begun inspecting the windows, they made their way around to the side of the mansion. Now out of sight of Takuro and Mika, Anna distanced herself from the stone wall and approached the mansion itself. Shun followed suit. Listening closely, he could hear the sound of something passing through the grass behind the mansion. Someone must be there. Shun could feel the muscles in his face tensing in fear.

“It’s okay. Ghosts aren’t this loud.”

Anna’s words made him shudder even more. She must have been trying to cheer him up, but her efforts had backfired. Anyone who would lurk around a place like this alone of their own free will was scarier than any ghost. Perhaps sensing his fear, she turned to him.

“There’s no need to worry, silly.”

She smiled as a bluish-white hand appeared over her shoulder.

“A-Anna...”

“What is it?”

The hand slowly lowered onto her right shoulder. The next moment, Shun let out a scream so loud it surprised even him.

3

“Hey, who’s there?”

Takuro, Mika, and Takeshi came running after hearing Shun scream.

He wanted to run, but his lower half wouldn’t listen to him. He simply sat there in the tall grass, unable to move. He looked around, but didn’t see Anna anywhere now. She must have managed to quickly hide before the others arrived.

“What? It’s you? Hey, what the hell are you doing here?”

Takuro’s piercing glare was sharper than any dagger. Shun suddenly understood exactly what it felt like to be a deer in headlights. Fear paralyzed him as thick sweat ran down his body.

“U-Um...”

He tried desperately to think of an excuse, but panic seized his brain.

“Are you deaf? I asked what you’re doing sneaking into my yard.”

“Oh, sorry. This is your family’s property? I totally thought it was abandoned.”

Before Shun could answer, the one who had given him such a fright sneaking around the back of the mansion piped up. It was Hiroshi.

“Don’t bother with the excuses. Just answer honestly. What were you doing?”

“Searching for insects,” Hiroshi replied flatly, brushing hitch-hiking seeds from his sleeves.

He was still wearing his school uniform, suggesting he’d come straight here after parting ways with Shun at the marsh. Unlike Shun, who was about to have a total breakdown, Hiroshi was the very image of composure.

“Searching for insects? Hey, brain trust, you think we’ll believe a lie like that?” Takeshi suddenly piped up from his position hiding in Takuro’s shadow.

“You sure are something, trying to act big as soon as you realized it wasn’t a ghost,” Mika spat. “You were the one crying that we should leave because the

place was haunted.”

“Wh-What’re you talking about, Mika? I wasn’t crying. Sure, the pitch of my voice may have risen a little, but that’s not the same. Besides, there’s no such thing as ghosts. There’s no way I’d be scared of—”

“Shut up, Takeshi. Put a sock in it for a minute, will you?”

“...Sorry.”

Takeshi’s already small figure shrank even more after being yelled at by Takuro.

“He has a point, though. That’s enough nonsense. Fess up, Hiroshi.” The glint in Takuro’s eyes grew sharper. “The brightest kid in our class wouldn’t be out doing something as kiddy as catching bugs. You don’t even have a net or cage.”

“Oh, they made it difficult to manage the wall, so I left them by the road,” Hiroshi answered in his usual tone as he pushed up his glasses. He never showed hesitation, not even in front of Takuro. “You seem to be under a rather blatant misconception, however. Allow me to enlighten you. Searching for bugs isn’t a child’s game. When investigating the insects that inhabit an area, you can approach it from many disciplines—taxonomy, ecology, geology, and environmental studies included. In fact, it might even be the key to unraveling the secrets of Earth’s history. For example, the manga artist Osamu Tezuka’s pen name comes from the osamushi or carabinae subfamily of beetles, which has undergone a retrogression of its rear wings, eliminating its ability to fly. This in turn makes speciation more likely—”

“All right, all right. Enough. We get it. You’re a bug nerd.” Grinning wryly, Takuro cut off Hiroshi’s lecture. It seemed like he would keep going forever otherwise. “I don’t care about the bugs. I wanted to know about you.”

“Sorry. I have absolutely no interest in the ecology of humans.”



“Don’t give me that bull.” Takuro was quick to call Hiroshi out. “You said you climbed the wall to get in here, right? That’s a joke.”

“I have never once made a joke in all of my life.”

Takuro considered that might be a joke in itself, but Hiroshi’s face was dead serious.

“That wall’s five meters high. And there’s barbed wire on top. It’s no easy feat to scale that thing.”

“That’s not necessarily true.” His eyes sparkling behind his glasses, Hiroshi continued, “It’s a little simplistic to assume a wall is impenetrable just because it’s tall, don’t you think? If you change your perspective a bit, you can easily find the path you need to follow.”

“Huh? I have no freaking idea what you’re rambling about.”

“There’s a trash collection spot on the other side of the wall. Every Tuesday and Thursday, piles of trash get placed there. Did you know that?”

“Of course not. What of it?”

“The sign above the trash spot is quite old. It’s most likely been there for a long time. Since the last time this place was inhabited, I imagine, which got me thinking. Naturally, the residents of this estate would also use that spot for their trash. However, it’s quite a hike from the main gate just to dump trash. Surely that would get annoying week after week, no? If it were me, I definitely would have constructed a back door,” Hiroshi explained, approaching the wall.

“A back door? There wasn’t anything like that, was there?”

“No, there was. You were just so caught up in your orthodox conception of a back door that you didn’t see it. It wouldn’t have to be large since it would only be used for throwing out the trash. With that in mind, I inspected the wall around the trash area, and...”

Squatting down, Hiroshi selected a section of the wall close to the ground and gave it a strong push. With a thud, a chunk about fifty square centimeters wide fell away. Through the open hole, they could see the asphalt road.

“My friend who’s in college lives around here. He found a stag beetle larva

but doesn't know how to raise it, so he asked me for advice. I was on my way to his house when I spotted an unusual grasshopper in front of this wall. Thinking it could be a new species, I tried to capture it, but it escaped over the wall. I was so intent on capturing it that I found this hole and slipped through. That's the gist of it."

His explanation was so detailed and reasonable that there was no room for rebuttal. Takuro fell silent.

"A new species of grasshopper? I saw one of those too. It was sort of blue, right?" Mika asked. "It flew at me and stung my hand. Oh, grasshoppers don't sting, do they? So it bit me then, I guess?"

"Where did you see it?" Hiroshi leaned forward.

"By the entrance."

"Thank you very much. I shall go investigate right away."

Just as he was about to leave, the loud sound of something breaking echoed nearby.

"What was that?"

Everyone looked at each other, eyebrows raised.

"It sounded like it came from inside the mansion."

Takuro and Takeshi's expressions changed.

"You don't think it's a ghost, do you?" Takeshi asked, the fear audible in his voice.

"That's quite an unscientific thing to say. Such things do not exist in this world." In contrast to Takeshi, Hiroshi was utterly calm.

"Let's check it out. You guys, come with me." Takuro took off running.

Mika, Takeshi, and Hiroshi followed after him. Hiroshi was most likely interested in the grasshopper by the entrance rather than the sound that came from inside the mansion.

Shun knew he couldn't run off by himself in this situation. Slumping his shoulders, he reluctantly chased after Hiroshi.

Chapter 4

AMANOJAKU

Intruder

- 1.) A person who purposefully goes against others; a perverse or contrary person
- 2.) An evil demon in folk tales, most famously from "Urikohime." Said to come from the legend of Amanosagume

1

Shun reached the front of the mansion a little after the others. They were all standing on the stone tiles in front of the entrance with puzzled looks on their faces. The door, elaborately decorated with art deco-style reliefs, was thrown wide open. Shun stared inside. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling was swaying in the wind blowing in from the door. Red carpet covered the stairs, something he'd only seen in foreign movies. A Western suit of armor stood next to the staircase, giving the whole thing a bizarre feel.

A sharp ache suddenly shot through Shun's temple. His face twisted in agony.

Again...

Unease swirled inside him. It was just like the pain he'd felt when talking to Anna by the abandoned plant. What was going on?

"This is amazing."

While Shun was busy moping, Hiroshi was rapt. His eyes sparkled behind his glasses as he restlessly scanned the mansion, seemingly having forgotten all about the grasshopper. Near the suit of armor sat Takuro's hand truck. The cardboard boxes remained stacked on top of it.

"...Why is the door open?"

Takuro's Adam's apple rose and fell dramatically.

"It refused to budge a few minutes ago, so who opened it? And who moved the hand truck in here?" he asked, raising his voice as he looked around at everyone.

"I-It wasn't me!" Takeshi jumped to clear his name, emphatically waving his hands in front of his chest. "I mean, we couldn't get it to move at all, right? We didn't have the key either, and I was with you the whole time."

"Then who did it?"

"Maybe your dad?" Mika suggested as she walked by Takuro to get a look at the inside of the mansion. "He's the only one who has the key to this place,

right? So that's the only possibility. Maybe he had some business here and stopped by."

Or perhaps he'd come to yell at his son for stealing the key.

While everyone else anxiously discussed the possibilities, Hiroshi stroked the wall with his palm and whispered to Shun, "This is stucco."

"It wasn't my dad," Takuro said, looking steamed.

"How do you know that for sure?"

"He would have driven here. But we didn't hear an engine, now did we?"

Shun looked back at the gate. It was just as he'd left it, ajar only wide enough for a teenager to narrowly squeeze through. Shun had recently seen a picture of Takuro's father in an interview in a local community magazine, so he remembered him quite clearly. He was a round, plump, giant of a man. Unless he'd gone on the crash diet of the century, there was no way he could make it past that gate, meaning it couldn't have been him that opened the door. It was hard to imagine anyone else would have come in from the outside, which only left one potential person who could have snuck into the mansion: Anna, who had agilely run off before Takuro and the others appeared.

"Heyo! Anyone here?"

Takuro shouted into the mansion's halls. But as expected, no answer came.

"Hey, let's just go." Takeshi tugged on the sleeve of Takuro's coat, fear written all over his face. "There's something weird about this mansion. I wasn't seeing things when I saw that eyeball earlier, either. Someone must be here."

"Don't be stupid. Wouldn't they have left their shoes at the door if they lived here? Oh, of course. Ghosts don't wear shoes, do they?"

"No one said anything about ghosts. It could be a thief. A thief could easily pick the lock and wouldn't bother taking off their shoes, right?"

"This rundown dump has been abandoned for nearly twenty years. Who would bother robbing a place like this? I don't see anything expensive—"

Takuro was interrupted by a sudden noise that sounded like a plate being smashed somewhere within the mansion. His face stiffened. It was hard to tell if

he was scared or angry.

“Who’s there?” he barked, his voice echoing down the hallway.

“...Let’s just stop this,” Takeshi whimpered as he sank to the floor. “This is all your doing, isn’t it?”

Shivering, he hugged himself. His face was a mess and he looked like he’d burst into tears at any moment.

“Enough with the bad pranks. If you go too far, we could have another Naoki on our hands. If you hadn’t chased him—”

“Stop it, Takeshi. Don’t say another word.”

Shun picked up on the sinister change in Takuro’s expression. Takuro looked like a starving beast sizing up his prey. Even though Shun wasn’t his target, it sent a chill down his spine. He felt like a rabbit in the presence of a mad wolf. One wrong move and those fangs would tear into his throat and kill him instantly.

“Oh... Sorry.”

Takeshi must have gotten the same vibe. His face paled and he went silent.

The sound of another smashing plate broke the heavy silence, this time even louder than before.

“Who the hell is breaking and entering in my house? I’m gonna catch them and teach them a lesson!”

Takuro pulled a folding knife from the back pocket of his form-fitting pants and went further inside the mansion, still wearing his dirty shoes. He passed by the staircase and started to walk into the back of the house.

“Wait, Takuro!” Mika chased after him. “Please, calm down. Put away the knife. We don’t need that, do we?”

She apparently wasn’t concerned for Takuro’s well-being. In fact, it appeared to be the opposite. She was worried about what Takuro might do to someone else. They turned left past the suit of armor and disappeared from view.

“What a curious building. Did the previous residents have some special

fascination with Europe?”

“Huh? What’re you babbling about now?”

Takeshi couldn’t hide his irritation at Hiroshi’s seeming lack of concern for the situation.

“Shut up for a minute, you bookworm. This isn’t study hall.” His tone was acidic, but his complexion was as pale as ever.

“Doesn’t this building remind you of the Pisa Cathedral?” Hiroshi indifferently continued his train of thought and didn’t seem to even register Takeshi’s comments.

“What about pizza?”

“The Pisa Cathedral. One notable example of Romanesque architecture. Would it be easier to understand if I told you it was the place where Galileo Galilei formulated his theory on the isochronism of the pendulum?”

Takeshi cocked his head quizzically and scratched the tip of his nose. Shun could hardly follow what Hiroshi was saying either.

“The inner walls here also use a natural plaster called stucco that was popular in Europe, so I think the person who built this mansion was a big fan of Western style.” Hiroshi continued to ramble, drawing his face closer to the wall. “My grandfather on my mother’s side was Italian, so I’ve always had an interest in European culture myself. I bet this mansion is filled with more fascinating decorations. I’m going to do a little investigating of my own.”

He set off without any hesitation, taking the right hall before the staircase and disappearing into the room at the end.

“What’s with him?” Takeshi shrugged.

He’d apparently had enough of Hiroshi’s self-indulgent personality. On the other hand, Shun was beginning to envy Hiroshi’s ability to simply be himself without regard for what other people thought.

“Everyone’s crazy. They just stroll into this creepy place like it’s nothing. I’m going home. I’m not scared though, you hear? My mom ordered me to help out with the restaurant, so I have no choice.” Takeshi blathered on even though no

one had asked him to explain himself, and then he made to leave.

Suddenly, as if to shut off his escape, the front door slammed shut. At the same time, the chandelier lit up.

“The game begins.”

Shun thought he heard a voice and looked around, but there was no one there except the frightened Takeshi. Shun gripped his collar tightly as an ominous premonition came over him.

2

“Wh-Wh-What was that?” Takeshi went pale and, knees knocking, grabbed the staircase handrail for support. “Wh-Wh-Why did the door close?”

“Don’t worry. It was just the wind,”

Shun tried to reassure him, but Takeshi just shook his trembling head. His eyes were wide, his pupils mere pinpoints from the fear.

“The lights turned on too! I didn’t touch anything!”

“There’s probably a sensor—”

Shun stopped short and strained his ears. Close by, he could hear the sound of metal scraping against metal. The helmet on the suit of armor behind Takeshi swayed slightly. As if he’d noticed Shun staring, or possibly because he felt an unnatural presence, Takeshi turned around. Practically simultaneously, the helmet tumbled to the floor. Although it was just the helmet, it was made of metal and still had to weigh a considerable amount. It should have made a rather loud sound crashing to the floor, but Shun didn’t hear it because Takeshi screamed so loudly that he thought his eardrums might burst.

“Save meee!”

Bawling like a baby, Takeshi took off up the staircase like a bullet.

“Wait... Takeshi!”

Shun called out weakly, but there was no way Takeshi could hear him over his own screaming. The screams grew fainter as he ran further into the mansion, and eventually Shun heard nothing at all. Silence settled over the entrance hall. He looked around and gulped. The helmet on the floor looked like a severed head, which sent a chill up his spine. He hadn’t felt anything earlier, but now that he was alone, fear bubbled up inside him.

I should leave.

He turned his back to the suit of armor and made to leave.

“Shun.”

A voice from somewhere behind surprised him. He felt his muscles tense in fear, and he slowly turned to face the speaker. Anna stepped out from the shadow of the suit of armor.

“D-Don’t scare me like that.”

Shun put a hand over his heart, which was racing a million miles an hour, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“How long have you been hiding there?” he asked.

He felt a little awkward with his shoes on in someone else’s house, but it would be more awkward to be the only one with no shoes on. Tip-toeing so he wouldn’t dirty the floor, he approached Anna.

“Have you been here ever since we got separated?”

“Yeah. I was going to investigate what was inside the boxes Takuro brought, but when I got to the entrance, the door was open for some reason... Then I sensed everyone coming back and I panicked. I ran inside and hid behind this suit of armor. My heart almost stopped when the helmet fell off, though.”

“Were those sounds earlier your doing too?”

“That wasn’t me. I think there might be something else other than us in here,” Anna answered as she looked up at the chandelier.

“What do you mean by ‘something’? A ghost?”

She nodded hesitantly.

“Did you... see something?”

“Nothing yet. But whenever I’m about to, I start shivering and it’s like all the blood in my body freezes. I’ve been feeling that sensation since the moment I laid eyes on the Jailhouse walls. Normally it’s not like that... I think something mysterious definitely snuck in here,” Anna quickly explained as she grabbed Shun’s arm and walked over to the door.

“...Huh? What?”

“I think this place is sort of what people mean when they say curiosity killed the cat. We need to get out of here quickly.”

She reached for the doorknob, but when she went to turn it, the blood drained from her face. The door wouldn't open.

"You're kidding... How?" Anna breathed, horrified.

Shun also tried the knob, but the result was the same. He checked around it and discovered there was no locking mechanism. The keyhole was just empty.

"...What's going on here?"

Anna looked at him imploringly, but Shun was equally confused.

There was probably some mechanism that automatically locked the door upon closing, but he'd never heard of a door that required a key to open from the inside. The only need for something like that would be in a prison.

It can't be...

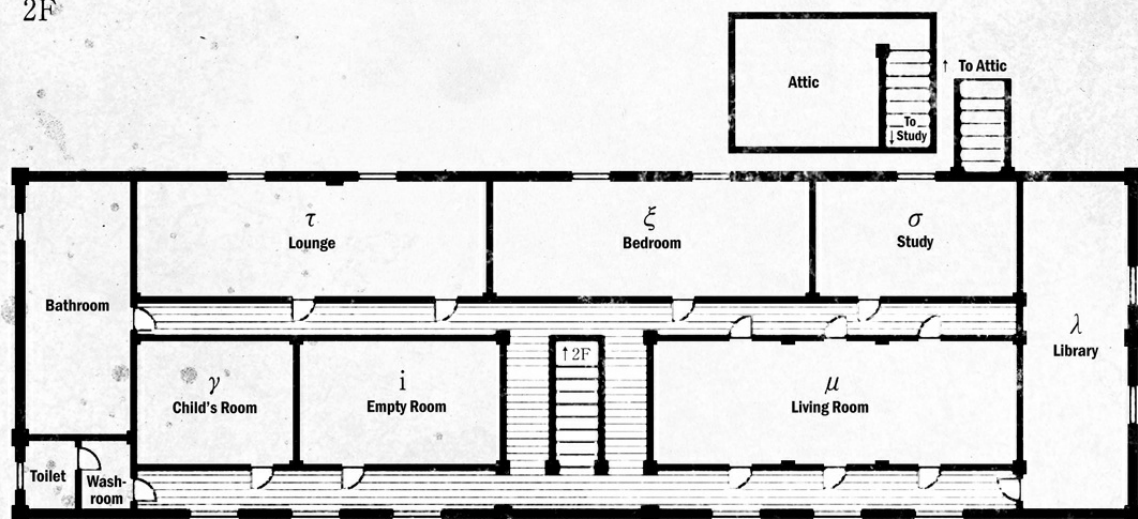
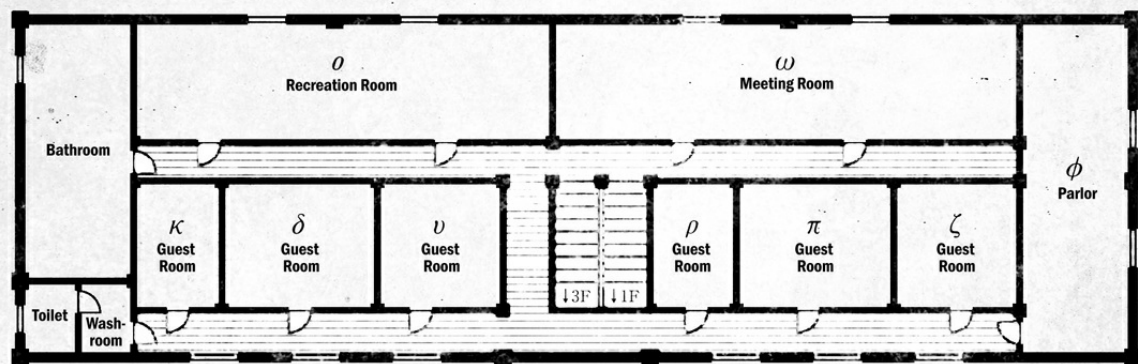
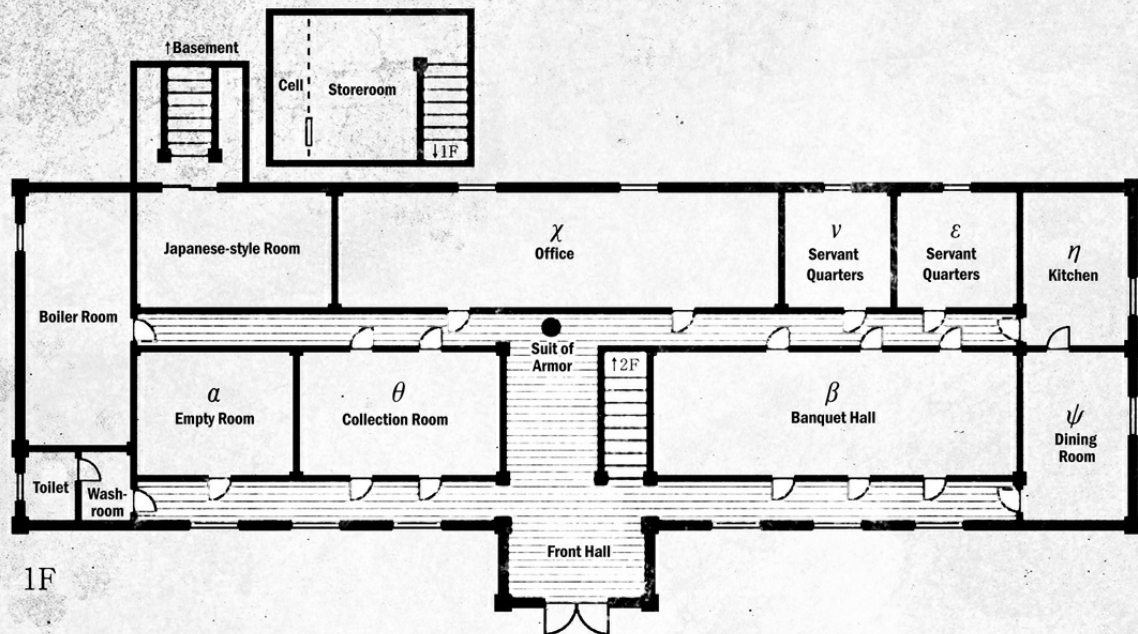
Shun's eyes shot open as he scanned his surroundings. Thick boards were nailed to the windows. Even if they could pry them off, there were still iron bars across the glass outside.

Could this be...? No, don't be stupid. There's just no way.

"Hey, Shun..."

Anna's lips were trembling as she gave words to the one possibility Shun had been desperately trying to deny.

"...Do you think we've been trapped in here?"



Mansion Map

Chapter 5

KIKOKUSHUUSHUU

Blue Shadow

- 1.) A sound like the crying of a restless spirit
- 2.) Giving off a ghastly, fearsome presence

1

Silence fell over the mansion once more. Shun closed his eyes and cupped his hands to his ears, but all he could hear was Anna's uneasy breathing next to him. He had no idea where their other classmates had disappeared to.

The shadows cast by the chandelier swayed creepily from right to left. It hadn't ceased its dancing even after the front door closed and there was no more draft. But why? All Shun could think was that something supernatural was trying to scare them by shaking it.

Over ten minutes had passed since everyone split up, but there was no sign of anyone returning. Shun and Anna stood alone in the entrance hall of the mansion.

"We should find someone and let them know what happened," Anna said, leaning against the staircase handrail. "If we work together, we might be able to break the door."

"Yeah... Good idea."

Of the six of them trapped inside the mansion, Takuro was the strongest. Shun would rather avoid him if possible, however, and Anna likely felt the same way. But he wasn't the only one they could go to for help.

Shun looked around. The hanging lamp in the hall was on, illuminating further into the house. At the end of the long hall, he could see the easternmost door Hiroshi had entered. Surely he would be the most dependable in a situation like this. Hiroshi would come up with an escape plan in no time.

"Wait here."

Leaving Anna behind, Shun proceeded down the hall. No one had lived here for nearly twenty years, or so the story went, yet the floors didn't creak with age and not a speck of dust hung in the air. It actually made Shun feel guilty about not taking off his shoes.

An inlay of clouded glass decorated the door Hiroshi had entered at the end of the hall. Through it, an orange light could be seen from inside. Shun couldn't

be sure, but he thought he could make out some kind of table as well.

He grabbed the knob and turned it to the right, but just like the front door, he was mysteriously unable to open it. He jiggled the knob furiously, pulling and pushing at the door, but the result was the same.

Why? When did it get locked?

Shun was absolutely sure Hiroshi had entered the room. That meant the door must have been locked after that, but it didn't seem like Hiroshi to lock the door from the inside. Were all the doors connected to the entrance by some mechanism that locked them at the same time?

"Hiroshi? You're in there, aren't you? Open the door."

Shun banged on the door but got no response. It was clear that Hiroshi was in there, so what was the deal? Intense unease caused Shun's breathing to grow labored.

"What's the matter?" Anna asked. She came over when she noticed Shun trembling at the door.

"It won't open and he won't answer me, but I know he's in there!"

"Huh? Why..."

As her face stiffened, the click of a lock from a different door in the room could be heard. Then a dark figure appeared on the other side of the clouded glass.

"Oh, that must be Hiroshi. Thank goodness. He was probably investigating another room you can get to from inside. Hiroshi, can you open this door?"

Anna reached out to knock, but Shun hurriedly stopped her.

"What?" Anna asked, looking at him in surprise.

"Look closely. Something's strange."

Still gripping her wrist, Shun nodded toward the door. The figure was slowly drawing closer. Only its silhouette was visible through the clouded glass, but it had broad shoulders and thick arms—there was no way it was Hiroshi. Shun and Anna backed away until they were up against the wall on the other side of the

hallway. They both held their breath as the figure passed by the door. Shun could hardly believe what he was seeing.

What is that?

Pain shot through his temple. Grimacing, he looked at the door again but the figure was already out of sight. They heard another door open and close, then silence. Shun gasped for air and, leaning against the wall, sank weakly to the floor. Anna sat down next to him.

“What was that...?” she asked, her voice hoarse and her eyes still glued to the door.

“You saw it too?”

She nodded meekly. They had both seen the same thing, which meant that neither one of them was hallucinating. Its body was huge and muscular, like a pro wrestler’s. And weirder still... it was blue. It had appeared to be slouching, but only its chest was visible through the door. Shun guessed it had to be at least two meters tall. The arms dangling at its sides were unnaturally distended and unlike anything Shun had ever seen.

“Could that be the spirit haunting this place? Its silhouette was quite different from the ones I normally see, though.”

“I don’t think it was a spirit,” Shun answered, trying to control his breathing. The pain was gone, but his heart was still trying to jump out of his chest. “Allegedly no one’s lived here for twenty years, yet there’s electricity and the place is even clean. Would a spirit turn on lights and open doors? I don’t think so. I think... someone’s living here.”

Shun suddenly realized how talkative he’d become. Usually he was so nervous that his body shook after saying a single word. He chalked this uncharacteristic behavior up to the extremely bizarre situation he’d found himself in. Maybe it was really getting to him.

“If a spirit can open doors, maybe it can do things like clean too. It’s not like we know what their habits are or what they’re capable of.” Anna stared into empty space and whispered, “It... might have even been Naoki.”

“You mean the kid who died in an accident before I transferred here?”

“Yes. I think it was probably his spirit.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I don’t know. It’s just... a feeling. When I saw that blue figure on the other side of the door, I instantly thought of Naoki.”

“So he was a big guy?”

“No, quite the opposite. He was short and slight... and so very kind. He never said no to anyone no matter what they asked. Takuro took advantage of him. He was always dragging him off somewhere during lunch to bully him.”

Shun’s chest suddenly felt tight. It was like Anna was describing him instead of Naoki.

“None of the teachers or other students seemed to notice though.”

“But you did?”

“Yes. I accidentally witnessed it.” Anna regretfully bit her lower lip and continued, “So I wrote an anonymous letter to the teacher. About how Takuro was bullying Naoki, I mean. Apparently the teacher talked to them both, but there was no way either one of them would admit it, right? So in the end, nothing changed. And... I couldn’t do anything after that either.”

Anna let out a heavy sigh that sank to her feet.

“I was scared of being ostracized from the class. I knew Naoki was being bullied, but I was scared of harm coming to me, so I pretended I didn’t. That’s... probably why I was punished in that accident in December.”

Looking at Anna’s downcast face, something occurred to Shun. The truck accident involving Anna and her parents happened in December of last year. Naoki Ohashi was also hit by a truck around the same time. It was hard to think two major accidents like that would happen back to back.

“The truck that struck us swerved into our lane because it was trying to avoid Naoki suddenly jumping into the street.”

“...I see.”

Whatever comfort he tried to offer would only come off as shallow, so Shun

kept his comments to himself. Awkwardness settled in between them. Shun, unable to bear looking at Anna on the verge of tears any longer, desperately tried to think of something worth saying.

“But... why do you think that giant man we saw was the spirit of Naoki? It looked nothing like him, right?”

“My friend who went to the funeral overheard people talking about how being skinny always bothered him. Apparently he was working out every day. That thing we saw... might be what Naoki wanted to look like in life, don’t you think?”

Shun’s expression clouded over. If that was her reasoning, it seemed like a stretch to claim that gorilla-like figure was her dead classmate. Anna must have immediately sensed Shun’s doubts, so she went on to explain herself more.

“But that’s not my only reason for thinking that. During the accident... I saw something from the car.” She stopped talking as a bitter, pained expression crept across her face.

“What did you see...?”

“Naoki lying in the road.”

As if remembering the scene, she shook her head and groaned.

“The truck trailer flipped and spilled a blue liquid all over him and the road... According to my friend, his body was still blue at the funeral. It was some chemical they apparently couldn’t wash off.”

Shun didn’t know what to say.

“Naoki must be after revenge,” Anna continued.

“Revenge? Why?”

“Because I knew he was being bullied but didn’t do anything.”

“But what could you have done? You told the teacher, didn’t you? Isn’t that enough?”

“Maybe that just caused Takuro to escalate the violence.”

“It would be absurd to blame you for that.”

“Perhaps, but... it was still cowardly of me to pretend I hadn’t seen anything.” Anna took a deep breath. “I’ve been keeping something quiet for a long time.”

She looked up at Shun with a determined look in her eyes. It was like she had resolved herself to do something.

“That wasn’t an accident,” she uttered, her voice trembling.

“What do you mean?”

“That day... Before the crash, I saw Naoki standing in the shade of the concrete wall by the road. He was waiting for a truck to come, and then jumped into the road... At least, that’s how it looked to me.”

“So it was suicide and not an accident?”

He chose to end his life instead of suffering at Takuro’s hands any longer?

A sharp pain dug into his chest like his heart was being pierced by a drill. It all sounded so familiar.

That might be me someday.

“No, that’s not it.” Yet Anna denied it. “It wasn’t an accident or a suicide.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“It was murder,” she said in a whisper, her lips barely moving.

Shun was stunned. He opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn’t find the words.

“I saw him. I saw Takuro running for his life right after the crash.”

“What do you mean?”

It frustrated him that he could only seem to repeat that one phrase. The question was pointless anyway. Shun, as Naoki’s replacement, knew the truth of it better than anyone. A dull pain ran through his left ankle.

2

“Jump from here.”

Shun remembered how the dark of night hung over the school. How Takuro pointed to the window with a wry smile on his face.

Yet Shun had felt no fear. If he disobeyed, Takuro would just punch him in the stomach and spit on him like usual. Certainly, that would be less serious than if he jumped from a third-story window.

Normal, happy people who didn't know any better would say things like, “You can do anything if you try hard enough. You have to muster all your courage and fight back.” That's how they would try and console victims, but Shun's case was beyond even that. Being treated like a bug had slowly broken down his self-esteem. The more Takuro called him an idiot or a retard, the more Shun came to believe he really was one... or worse. He had no argument otherwise. Looking back at the “experiments” Takuro conducted on him without a care for his well-being, any confidence Shun had that he was even human was long gone.

I am a bug.

His human emotions faded one by one, leaving only the urge to die.

“Jump from here.”

Those words had come as a relief to Shun. You could even say he was grateful. Now he could be at peace. He could end everything. And so he obeyed. That was all there was to it. Naoki must have felt the same way.

“No one suspected anything?” Shun asked. “You said none of the teachers or other students realized he was being bullied, and it sounds like he was a quiet kid. Didn't it seem weird that he'd just jump into the street like that?”

“Everyone seems to think it was the curse of the Jailhouse.”

“What curse?”

“They say he was here up until right before the accident. He saw a ghost and it drove him mad with fear, which is why he ran into traffic.”

Such a possibility wasn't out of the question. The site of the accident was only a few hundred meters away from the Jailhouse.

“Where did that rumor come from?”

“One of our classmates said they saw him climb the stone wall of the Jailhouse.”

“Who was that?”

“Takeshi.”

I see. So that's how it is.

The pieces of the puzzle were slowly coming together.

“Takuro must have asked him to lie and say he was there when he really wasn't so that no one would suspect foul play in Naoki's death.”

There was no way a scaredy-cat like Takeshi was hanging around the Jailhouse of his own free will.

“...Shun, are you okay?” Anna asked suddenly. “Takuro's been bullying you too, hasn't he?”

Shun frantically tried to hide his shock behind a forced smile. Anna gave him a worried look.

Stop it.

He almost screamed out. She really seemed to be concerned about him, but he only felt like running away. It was like his body was trying to remind him of his own worthlessness.

“Don't get the wrong idea,” Shun replied, smiling. “I'm not like Naoki. We're just... horsing around.”

Shun sounded like a textbook bullying victim. He wasn't scared of Takuro's vengeance. He just desperately wanted to hide his patheticness.

“Stop lying. I've seen you two, you know. Last Sunday, I was in the same classroom.”

“...Huh?”

“I was there before you came. I heard footsteps approaching, so I hid underneath the teacher’s desk. You had no idea, did you?”

That meant she’d heard everything Takuro had said too. Shun was so embarrassed he wanted to disappear.

“What in the world were you doing there in the middle of the night?” he asked.

“The same thing you were,” she replied, her brow furrowing awkwardly. “My uncle has been taking care of me since my parents died, but it’s actually been suffocating with them worrying about every little thing. I don’t know if that’s why, but my last test my grades were worse than usual. The teacher scolded me. He said I wouldn’t be able to get into my dream school if I kept it up. Going to a private school would be expensive, so I’ve been trying hard to not inconvenience my uncle’s family... but I just couldn’t focus. And the more I worried, the worse I seemed to get at everything...” Anna continued to speak rapidly, almost like she was possessed. “And then I happened to overhear my aunt and uncle fighting. It was about money. Things haven’t been going well with my uncle’s job, and now they’re saddled with a burden like me. Of course they’d fight.”

Shun could only listen as she continued to blurt out her story.

“I’d always assumed I’d study hard and get into a good high school, but I can’t trouble them that much, can I? I didn’t know what to do. I just keep causing other people trouble. When I had that thought, I started hating everything. Why didn’t I die along with my parents? It’d just be better for everyone if I disappeared. Stuff like that.”

Anna sighed.

“I really was thinking of dying, but then you interrupted me and all those feelings boiling inside me cooled instantly,” she said in a lighthearted tone as if she was trying to make a joke.

“Were you the one who called the ambulance?” Shun asked.

“Yeah. I couldn’t just sit there and do nothing after seeing what happened.”

“Then you interrupted my attempt too.”

“I guess we’re both just rude, huh?”

His eyes met hers as she looked up. Shun smiled even though it wasn’t particularly funny. Anna returned his smile. It seemed the inner workings of their hearts were perhaps much the same.

“We’re birds of a feather, aren’t we?” said Anna.

Her words offered Shun a small amount of comfort. Here was a girl skilled in sports and academics. Everyone loved her and all the teachers respected her. She was the class president, perfect from every angle, yet she also held an emptiness inside her much like Shun did.

“Well, there’s no use in sitting around here.” Anna stood up, smiling awkwardly, and said, “If that’s really Naoki, then I want to apologize to his face.”

As Anna turned to set off, a piercing scream echoed down the hall from the direction of the staircase.

Chapter 6

ONINEZUMI

Starving Rats

1.) The greater bandicoot rat, a species of rodent

1

Shun looked at Anna. It didn't take long for them to realize the scream was Takeshi's. No one else could possibly scream so pathetically.

But what had happened now? Shun was a little afraid to find out after just hearing Anna tell him Naoki's ghost might be haunting the halls, but they couldn't just abandon Takeshi. Shun returned to the entrance hall and started to sprint up the stairs. He thought Anna was following him, but it was then that he realized he no longer heard her footsteps. Turning around, he saw her standing at the bottom of the stairs looking up at him.

"...Anna?"

"Can you go on ahead? I'll catch up soon."

"Oh... Okay."

He couldn't ask her why. The tense air about her made him instinctually back down. Any hesitation he had was interrupted by Takeshi screaming again, followed by the sound of panicked footsteps running down the hall. Something was definitely happening.

"I'll be waiting upstairs for you then," Shun said and hurried to the second floor, leaving Anna behind.

The second floor was basically the same as the first. A long hall stretched to the east and west. Windows sat evenly spaced along the south wall, and just like the first floor, each one was boarded up so that there wasn't even a chance of peeking outside. Shun quickly looked around but didn't see Takeshi.

"Takeshi?"

He'd been so loud only seconds ago, yet now he wouldn't even respond to his own name. Where had he gone? Shun took a moment to survey his surroundings. The red carpet continued up the stairs to a third floor, but he could swear the screams sounded closer than that. Shun was sure Takeshi had to be on this floor.

There was a line of doors on the wall opposite the windows. Unlike the doors

on the first floor, these were all made of solid wood so there was no way to see inside the rooms. White panels were plastered on the upper sections of each door with unusual letters engraved into them.

...Huh?

The memory drawer in Shun's brain rattled and shook. He'd seen this somewhere before, but he couldn't remember exactly where. Pain pulsed through his temple. His eyebrows scrunched up tighter than they ever had.

Shaking his head lightly, Shun grabbed the knob to the door marked "p." Unfortunately, this door was locked too and wouldn't open. He knocked, but no one answered. It looked like his only choice was to check every room one by one. Wiping his sweaty palms on his pants, he moved to the next door. The panel on this one had a strange mark on it that looked like a traditional Japanese wooden sandal drawn from the side. He tried the knob. This time, surprisingly, the door opened with no trouble.

Hesitantly, Shun peered inside. The walls were illuminated by an orange light. The room was large enough to pass as a master bedroom, but it was only furnished with a wardrobe, a desk, and a bed. There was no sign of anyone having lived there. It looked more like a showroom or a hotel room. And though it supposedly had been abandoned for years, there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen anywhere.

"...Takeshi, are you here?" Shun called out, but no one answered.

He stepped into the room, looking about. Just on the other side of the door was a lone sneaker. He stooped down and picked it up. The white design with green stripes looked familiar. It was the same as the shoes Takeshi normally wore. What was it doing here though? Remembering the giant figure he saw downstairs, fear seized Shun's body.

Was he attacked by that thing?

Still holding the shoe, he dashed back out the door. Just then, he heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. Surprised, he dropped the sneaker.

"You really think he's okay?" It was Mika's voice. "You heard that scream. He could have been attacked by a monster."

Mika, a firecracker who normally mouthed off to teachers and older students, was quivering in her boots.

“That’s ridiculous. Please keep your unscientific theories and your superstitions to yourself. There’s no such thing as monsters or ghosts,” Hiroshi responded in his usual calm demeanor, the complete opposite of Mika.

It was a relief to know he was safe.

“But you heard those weird noises by the entrance.”

“There was broken tableware scattered about the kitchen. The dishes and things most likely fell from the shelves. That’s all there is to it.”

“This place is abandoned. How could they just fall off the shelves?”

“There are many imaginable possibilities. The shaking of the Earth, aging cabinets, or even the change in the mansion’s air pressure from opening the front door. Any one of these things could have made the plates wobble slightly.”

“Then what made Takeshi scream like that?”

“There’s no point in wasting brain cells on that when we can just go ask him directly.”

Mounting the top of the stairs, Hiroshi looked in Shun’s direction. Mika, hiding behind him, cautiously peered around. For some reason, Takuro wasn’t with them.

“Hiroshi, I found Takeshi’s shoe!” Shun said, pointing at the sneaker he’d dropped by accident.

“I see. It’s quite likely Takeshi is in that room then.”

Hiroshi picked up the shoe and walked over to the door Shun had come out of. He then looked back and forth between the shoe and the room while muttering to himself.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone here, though—”

“There.”

Cutting Shun off, Hiroshi pointed to the wardrobe standing in the corner.

“Huh? How do you know?”

“How can you tell?”

Shun and Mika both had questions. Hiroshi pushed up his glasses before explaining.

“It’s simple,” he said as the corners of his lips curled upward. “This sneaker is quite worn out. The insole is all ragged.”

Shun held his nose and looked inside the shoe. Just as he’d said, the insole was shredded in places and even the brand logo was nearly unreadable.

“There’s a piece of the insole on the floor in front of the wardrobe,” he said as he walked over toward it.

Shun and Mika followed.

“A piece of it stuck to his sock must have come loose as he jumped in this wardrobe to hide after losing his shoe in a frantic scramble.”

A crucifix pendant was tied around the wardrobe handle. The figure of Christ nailed to the cross looked up at them with empty eyes.

“Takeshi, do you mind if I open this door?”

Hiroshi knocked on the wardrobe door, but no answer came.

“Takeshi, if you’re in there then come out!” Mika shouted.

She ripped the crucifix from the door and hurled it open, revealing a quivering, huddled mass of a human being. Just as Hiroshi had deduced, Takeshi was hiding inside the wardrobe. Curled up like a child, he was shaking uncontrollably.



“What’re you doing in here?”

Mika looked at him with disdain. Even so, Takeshi didn’t respond. He kept his head between his knees and continued to tremble.

“Hey... Say something already.”

Grabbing the back of his collar, Mika tried to pull him out of the wardrobe, but Takeshi stubbornly refused to move.

“I’m sorry, Naoki. Forgive me... Forgive me...” he murmured weakly from between his knees. “I told him to stop. But... But Takuro...”

“Are you sure about this?” Mika bent down and drew close to his ear. “Say any more and Takuro might kill you.”

She may have been trying to keep quiet, but Shun heard her loud and clear.

“Takeshi. Could you tell us what happened?” Hiroshi asked.

Takeshi finally lifted his head.

“I... I saw...” he murmured with a raspy voice, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“You saw something? What was it?”

“Blue... Blue...”

Shun’s eyes went wide at his response. Had he seen the giant too?

“Hey, Takeshi. Was it—”

“Ew! What is that?” Mika shouted as if to drown out Shun.

Following her gaze, Shun and Hiroshi spotted a creature about the size of a fist as it cut across the room heading for the door. It had a pointy tail like a rat’s, but it was covered in blue fur. Shun had never seen any rat like that before.

“What a curious creature,” Hiroshi uttered as he quickly dashed out of the room after it.

“Wait a minute. Don’t tell me you screamed because a rat scared you,” Mika said wearily. “I knew you were a coward, but I didn’t know you were a baby. Your screaming took about three years off my life, I’ll have you know! What an

idiot. For all I care, you can just stay there crying,” she spat as she slammed the wardrobe door and turned to leave.

“No!” Takeshi cried, looking utterly miserable as the door shut on him. Shun thought he’d burst out of the wardrobe, but the door remained shut.

Was it just a rat that scared him? Shun cocked his head quizzically. Certainly Takeshi was a coward, but this level of fear seemed unnatural even for him.

He must have seen the giant...

Suddenly Shun felt something rushing past his feet. Looking down, he saw the rat from earlier dash between his legs. The strange creature climbed the table, jumped to the bed, then turned toward him.

“What *is* that?”

He couldn’t look away from the strange thing. The blue rat’s head was abnormally large, like a super deformed cartoon character. Perhaps if it had been a cartoon it would have been cute, but it was just creepy to see in real life. Two monstrously large eyes sat in its freakishly large head. They were so big that it looked like they might fall out at any moment. The creature stood on the bed on its hind legs, bared its front teeth, and howled like a monkey. Was it a defensive behavior? The rat creature didn’t appear to feel threatened. No... It was more as if it was taunting them.

2

The rat's massive, unblinking eyes glared at Shun. He was so stunned that he simply stood in front of the wardrobe, unable to move, think, or react. The same went for Mika, who had been heading for the door. She stood frozen, staring at the bed and whimpering the same thing over and over.

"No way... No way. There's... just no way, right?"

Shun felt like his brain had stopped working. It was like he simply couldn't process the situation or there was something supernatural keeping him glued to the spot. Either way, he couldn't look away from the rodent monster. Great globs of drool dripped from the rat's bared front teeth. Just as he was starting to fear it might devour him...

"Unfortunately it was too quick and I lost it," Hiroshi said with a sigh as he returned from his unsuccessful rat hunt.

"Hiroshi... Over here," Shun finally managed to say. Hiroshi's return seemed to bring him a little back to his senses.

Hiroshi looked to the bed and raised an eyebrow.

"What the..."

His words were slow and weighty. Had he also been paralyzed by fear like Shun and Mika?

"How fascinating."

His eyes lit up.

"This rat must have been born with a mutation. The blue grasshopper I saw outside was a strange shape as well. Perhaps there's some environmental factor like chemicals or radiation that's causing these changes in their genetic data. Oh, there is the chemical plant right next to this mansion. There could be a connection there."

"Radiation? My god..." Finally returning to her senses as well, Mika shook her head violently. "That's going to affect us too, right? No thank you! I don't want

my face to end up like that little monster's."

Shun thought she was making a joke to disguise her fear, but the panic written all over her face was quite obvious. She was apparently really worried about this.

"It's okay. Scientifically speaking, that's not how it works. However, if there is a source of radiation in the area that exceeds acceptable limits, we shouldn't stay here long. It would be a good idea to get away from this mansion as soon as possible."

"Then let's go now," Mika said, immediately turning and marching toward the door again.

"Go ahead," Hiroshi replied, his eyes still fixed on the bed.

"What? You're not leaving?" Mika asked, looking over her shoulder.

"I'm going to observe this rat for a little longer."

"Huh? Ew. Stop it. That's gross."

She was visibly disgusted at the idea, but it was soon clear that Hiroshi didn't much care. Slowly but surely, he approached the rat to try and capture it.

"What about you?" Mika asked, turning to Shun.

"I'd like to go home too, but..."

He realized this was the first time he'd ever really talked to Mika. His nerves got to him and his tongue felt heavy. Mika didn't know that the front door was locked yet. They'd have to find another exit if they wanted to leave the mansion. He wanted to tell her, but the words just wouldn't come out.

"Oh, for crying out loud! Every one of you is useless!" Her irritation finally boiled over as Shun remained silent. "You can all do whatever you want. I'm leaving. Bye."

She flippantly raised her right hand and stormed out of the room. Hiroshi, who didn't even seem to register her leaving, reached out for the rat-like—no, the deformed rat. His middle finger was just inches from its face. The rat's nose wiggled as if warily sniffing Hiroshi. Its giant eyes twitched nervously.

The moment Hiroshi lifted his other arm to try and capture it, a strange sound came from underneath the bed. The rat immediately ran from Hiroshi's hands and slipped under the bed. However, Hiroshi wouldn't give up that easily. He quickly stood up and shoved the bed aside.

"...!"

Shun was so shocked he couldn't even scream. A growling sound came from deep in his gut. He suddenly felt sick and collapsed to his knees. Over two dozen blue rats were crowded together under the bed, chewing on something. They all had giant heads like the first, with eyes so large that they took up half their faces.

"...What is going on here?"

Even Hiroshi was stumped. He covered his mouth with his right hand and slowly began backing up. It wasn't the mass of rats he was afraid of. It was what they were feeding on: a human arm, severed at the elbow.

Chapter 7

SHINSHUTSUKIBOTSU

Strange-Looking Creature

- 1.) (From the idea that kishin, fierce and terrible gods, appeared and disappeared at a whim) Appearing in unexpected places, achieving a goal, then leaving just as suddenly

1

Shun was so badly stunned at the sight before him that he forgot to even breathe. This had to be a nightmare.

The top half of the arm under the bed was almost entirely devoured by the rats. What was left of the dark red flesh looked slick—either from the seeping blood and lymphatic fluid, or the collective saliva of the rats—as it gleamed in the light from the lamp. A lone grey bone protruded from the elbow, where it looked like the arm had been ripped off. The largest, strongest rat was gripping it with its front paws and gnawing on it voraciously.

Unable to look at it anymore, Shun turned his head away.

“...You think it’s real?” he asked, afraid of the silence.

But Hiroshi didn’t answer. He just bent down and stared at the mass of rats. He seemed more interested in studying them than investigating the arm. That’s just the kind of guy he was.

Shun hesitantly returned his gaze to the underside of the bed. The arm on the floor had begun to lose its original shape thanks to the rats feasting on it, but it was still quite clear it was real. No matter how convincing, a prosthetic wouldn’t have been appetizing to the rats. It was impossible to discern much about the arm in the condition it was in now—whether it was a man or a woman’s, muscular or slim—but the five long fingers remaining on the hand were quite distinct. It was definitely a human arm.

The rat chewing on the bone looked up at Shun, almost like it realized he’d been staring at it. Its bloodshot eyes swiveled grotesquely as it bared its blood-drenched front teeth and let out a high-pitched screech. “*Don’t disturb us!*” it seemed to shout. The other rats raised their heads at their leader’s signal and glared at Shun and Hiroshi with crazed eyes.

Even Hiroshi seemed astounded by the strange scene. He quickly backed away from the bed and pressed his back against the wall.

Skree! Skree! Skree!

The other blue rats assumed the same posture as their leader and began screeching too. Just because they were rats didn't mean they should be taken lightly. If the swarm of them attacked together, they might be able to chew off Hiroshi's arm too.

"It seems we would be best served by retreating," Hiroshi advised cautiously.

Shun nodded repeatedly at the suggestion. He worried a little about Takeshi, who showed no sign of leaving the wardrobe, but he and Hiroshi couldn't stay in the room like this. Slowly, so as not to incite the rats, they backed into the hall. The moment they closed the door, the screeching ceased.

Have they returned to their feast now that the intruders are gone? No, maybe...

Shun grinned wryly at his own twisted, ridiculous imagination.

Maybe they're planning how to obtain their next meal.



2

The new species of grasshopper jumping around in the yard. The giant figure behind the clouded glass. The mutated rats eating human body parts. There was definitely something freaky about this mansion. Even though it was supposedly abandoned, strange things like plates falling from shelves, lights coming on automatically, and doors locking on their own kept happening.

As Shun and Hiroshi went down the stairs, they spotted Mika standing in the middle of the entrance hall with a sour look on her face.

“What’s the matter? I thought you went home.”

“I couldn’t even if I wanted to. What the hell is this? The door’s locked and won’t open,” she said stingingly, pointing at the door.

Shun lowered his head, feeling like she was blaming him for not mentioning that part.

“We’re inside the building, so we should be able to unlock the door from this side,” Hiroshi pointed out flatly.

“How? There’s only a knob and a keyhole,” Mika replied, somewhat exasperated.

“...What?”

“That’s what I was going to ask. What is this? What’s going on?”

“Let me see, please.”

Hiroshi approached the door. Shun was hoping he’d be able to figure something out.

“This is hopeless. We need a key.”

However, he only took one glance at the door before giving up on opening it.

“That’s impossible, right? Who needs a key to get *out* of a house? I’ve never heard of that.”

“Well, if this mansion is being used to keep someone under house arrest, it’s

not out of the question. Hmm... That may be why there are iron bars on the windows and thick planks nailed over every one of them. That could be the real reason this place is known as the Jailhouse.”

“House arrest? What are you talking about? Are you saying this is some hideout for a criminal organization? My mom told me a sickly girl in a wheelchair lived here.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that before too. Perhaps her parents constructed the manor this way so that she couldn’t get out.”

“...You mean she was abused?”

“Not necessarily. What if she was afflicted with terrible asthma? Right across the street is a massive chemical plant. Perhaps her parents were so worried for her health that they had no choice but to keep her locked in here.”

Their conversation rattled in Shun’s brain as he searched for any sign of Anna. He couldn’t find her anywhere. Thinking she might be in the bathroom, he began looking around on the first floor. He tried the doors in the hall again, but just like the second floor, they were all locked and none of the knobs would turn.

“Hey, I haven’t seen Takuro in a while. Where did he get off to?”

“How should I know?”

Hiroshi and Mika continued to talk.

“Weren’t you two together?” he asked.

“There was a huge Japanese-style room on this floor, but he just walked right in on the tatami mats without taking off his shoes. That bothered me a little. My dad’s really strict, so he’d yell at me if I even stepped on the edge of the tatami mat as a kid. Seeing Takuro do it without a second thought shocked me so I told him he shouldn’t do it, but he just yelled at me. He said, ‘It’s my house! Got a problem with that?’ I was like, ‘Fine, do whatever you want.’ Then I left him, and that’s when I heard Takeshi scream from upstairs.”

“A Japanese-style room?”

“What? Did I say something weird?”

“The exterior looks like the Pisa Cathedral, and the interior uses stucco for the walls. There’s even the suit of armor decorating the entryway. There’s so much European flair, yet one room is Japanese-style? It does seem quite strange.”

Odd feelings swirled around Shun as he listened to them talk. But it wasn’t like the unease Hiroshi was feeling; it was stranger than that. Shun could swear he’d heard this exact conversation before. It was like *déjà vu*.

Continuing west down the hall, he soon reached the last room. He hadn’t found a single unlocked door on this floor so far. Assuming this one would be no different, he reached out and halfheartedly twisted his wrist. To his surprise, the knob easily turned with it. Opening the door, he looked inside. The entire room was bathed in an orange glow, just like the one Takeshi had holed himself up in.

It was a washroom. Soap and a toothbrush lay on a shelf. The sink was porcelain and damp. It appeared to have been used recently. Clear water flowed freely from the faucet when Shun tested it.

What’s going on here?

He cocked his head quizzically. If the place was truly abandoned, then it would be odd for it to have running water. Even if the owners had forgotten to shut it off, the water that had been left sitting in the pipes should have been smelly and rusty brown when it first came out. Someone *must* be living here.

Further into the washroom, there was second door. Behind it was a Western-style toilet, but no Anna. Where had she disappeared to? Shun left the washroom to return to Hiroshi, but...

“Huh?”

From the end of the hall, he couldn’t see anyone standing in the foyer where he’d left the others.

“Hiroshi?” he called out, but no one answered. “Where are you?”

Shun hurried back down the hall and looked around, but the two figures that had been there only moments ago had vanished like dust in the wind. Thinking they might have managed to get the front door unlocked, he decided to try it for himself again. But no luck. The heavy door remained steadfastly stuck.

Maybe they're hiding somewhere to try and scare me? No, that's impossible.

He quickly dismissed the idea. He doubted Hiroshi was the type to pull such pranks, which only left one reason he could think of that they would have disappeared so suddenly. In the few minutes he'd been inspecting the washroom, something terrible had happened.

Straining his ears, he heard the sound of a door closing. It wasn't too far away. He quickly glanced down the hallway to his left and right, but didn't see any signs of movement.

"Which means..."

His gaze shifted past the staircase and the headless suit of armor. The door he'd heard must have been to one of the north-facing rooms along the back hall. Taking a few steps beyond the stairs, Shun glanced around the corner. When he did, he heard the door at the end of the hall to his right slam shut.

"Who's there?" he asked, sprinting down the hall in that direction.

He didn't hate being alone. Being with other people made him nervous and practically mute. Just worrying about what they might be thinking exhausted him, so he'd always thought that being alone was easier. But today was different. Today, being alone instilled in him a keen sense of dread. It was a lonely, terrifying feeling that was just too much to bear.

"Is that you, Hiroshi?" he called out, standing in front of the door that had just slammed shut.

Shun feared for his sanity if he remained all alone. His anxiety was only building. He hoped someone—anyone—would respond from the other side of the door, but there was no answer. Twisting the knob, he opened it. Then, as if someone had been waiting for him to do exactly that, he heard the sound of a second door in the room closing.

"Stop it already," he whimpered, followed by a small sigh of relief.

Someone is clearly pranking me.

Someone was enjoying scaring him. There had to be a hidden camera

somewhere recording his terrified expression and broadcasting it. Only Takuro would think of such a childish prank. Shun ordinarily did all he could to avoid him, but with how he was feeling right now, he'd still rather see Takuro than be alone. At the very least, a strong guy like him would easily be able to deal with the horde of rats if they attacked.

Shun looked around the room. Stainless steel shelves ran along the walls and further in was a giant professional fridge. In the center of the room was an island equipped with several gas burners.

This must be the kitchen.

Shun stepped inside and headed straight for the other door along the right wall.

"Takuro," he called out as he twisted the knob.

When he opened the door, a blue figure bolted through the room to yet another door, which then slammed shut behind it.

"...Huh?"

Shun was at a loss for words.

What... was that?

Its whole body was blue like it had been painted. It certainly wasn't Takuro. Shun hadn't gotten a good look since it was running so fast, but from what he'd seen of its back and legs, there was no way it was human. Its skin was rough with deep wrinkles, reminiscent of an elephant or hippopotamus you might see at the zoo. Its leg muscles were also abnormally developed.

Pain suddenly shot through Shun's temple. Memories deep in his hippocampus were struggling to surface. It was like he'd forgotten something very important, but every time he tried to remember, the headaches would stop him.

What's wrong with my brain?

A deep, dark unease assailed him. Such a creature couldn't exist.

Was it an illusion? Am I just imagining things?

Holding his breath, he scanned the room. In the center of it was a dining table, and the walls of the vast room were lined with cupboards. Cracked plates were scattered across the floor. It looked like they'd fallen off the shelves. This must be the dining room Hiroshi said he'd investigated.

Cautiously stepping into the room, Shun made his way to the door the strange figure had darted through. It was a wooden door with panes of clouded glass. There was no mistaking it. This was the room he and Anna had first seen the blue figure in.

Shun looked at the doorknob, but there appeared to be no mechanism to lock the door from the inside. Without a key, they had no hope of locking or unlocking anything. On the other hand, if the blue giant had the key, it would be able to move freely through the mansion.

Shun grabbed the knob with a sweaty palm, slowly opened it, and peered outside. Just as he suspected, the door opened into the front hallway. Further down, he could see the entrance to the mansion. But the hall itself was empty and silent. The blue figure must have gone somewhere else.

I have to run... before it's too late.

Sensing danger, Shun's instincts kicked in, urging him to escape. He hurried toward the entrance hall. A sliver of hope in his heart, he put his hand on the front door. But nothing had changed. It still refused to budge. Thinking he would try the windows, Shun did his best to rip off one of the boards. Without any sort of tool, however, it was a practically impossible feat. At a loss for what else to do, he slumped down in the middle of the entrance hall.

What time is it?

Without any way to see outside, he couldn't tell how dark it had gotten outside. He looked to his left wrist for the time, but the wristwatch he usually wore wasn't there. He must have dropped it after being bullied by Takuro during lunch. It was only a cheap timepiece he'd bought at the general store, but just the thought that he'd lost something yet again because of Takuro clouded his heart.

How much has he taken from me? And not just my money or belongings. My smile, my pride, my ability to feel, and...

“What the heck? What the heck is that?”

Shun looked up when he suddenly heard Mika shouting. She and Hiroshi were rushing down the stairs from the second floor. They were moving so quickly that Mika kept tripping over her own feet.

“First that freaky door opens so we book it upstairs, then... then... Ahhh!”

“Please calm down. We’re okay now,” Hiroshi said, looking behind them. “It seems it gave up. I don’t see it chasing us anymore.”

Mika blew past Shun, grabbed the knob of the front door, and began pulling on it violently.

“It still won’t open! God! What’s going on here? I want to go home!”

“The door’s quite sturdily constructed, so breaking it down would be difficult. We have no choice but to find the key.”

“How can you be so calm? You saw that monster too, didn’t you?” Mika shouted.

Her hair was disheveled and she looked like she’d seen a ghost. Whatever it was, it must have given her a real fright. Her lips were near purple and trembling slightly.

“Yes, and I can still hardly believe my own eyes.”

“What was that naked, blueberry-colored giant?”

Shun stiffened up at those words.

“You know everything, don’t you? You should know what that thing was!”

“Unfortunately, I don’t. Not even Wikipedia has anything about a creature like that.”

They’d seen the giant too. Realizing that meant he couldn’t have been hallucinating, a complex mixture of relief and fear began brewing inside Shun.

“But that grasshopper, those rats, and that giant bipedal creature... I do know it’s safe to say this mansion is home to many such sudden mutations of several species. It’s clear they’re related in some way, as evidenced by the shared traits like the blue skin and abnormally developed eyes.”

Shun shivered when he remembered those rats glaring at him with those bloodshot eyes.

“That blueberry thing... As soon as it spotted us, it started chasing us. Why? What did we do to it?”

“At the very least, we’re intruding in this mansion. If it’s angry over that, we can’t exactly claim innocence.”

“I didn’t come inside because I wanted to. I would leave if I could, but the exit’s locked! What are we supposed to do? Hold on. Takuro’s dad owns this place, right? That means that thing is what’s trespassing, not us.”

“We can only hope it’s amenable to that logic,” Hiroshi said, shaking his head with a furrowed brow.

Just then...

“Uwaaaaah!”

Takeshi’s scream once again resounded from the second floor.

Chapter 8

SATSUJINKI

Chain of Tragedy

1.) An evil person who has killed multiple people and is likened to a devil

1

I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Naoki.

His head buried deep between his knees, Takeshi apologized over and over.

It wasn't my fault. It was all Takuro. I was just following his orders.

He was sobbing so uncontrollably that the thighs of his pants were soaked from tears, snot, and drool.

You know that no one can defy Takuro, don't you? I didn't really want to do it. Why would I? I didn't want to hurt a classmate. But I had no choice. He'd do the same thing to me if I disobeyed.

Takeshi lifted his head slightly when he thought he heard a sound in the room. The inside of the wardrobe was pitch black. Even with his eyes open, he couldn't see anything. He hated the dark but couldn't bring himself to leave. The moment he opened the wardrobe door, the monster Naoki had become would attack him.

After the scare with the suit of armor, he'd run to the second floor. It was there he saw the blue giant. He could still remember how his whole body went cold upon seeing that grotesque thing. It was a miracle he hadn't fainted right then and there. At least, that's what he tried to tell himself.

At first he thought it was someone in a costume. Maybe Takuro was wearing it to try and scare him. But it was soon obvious that wasn't the case. The giant's bright red, bloodshot eyes gave him one look before its whole body lurched forward aggressively, growling strangely. Its face, unmoving but full of anger, looked a lot like Naoki's dead expression in the picture Takuro had taken right after the accident.

"Came out well, didn't it?"

Unbelievably, Takuro was smiling when he showed him the photo. The intense contrast of the blue liquid from the truck staining his face and his eyes red with anger still haunted Takeshi. It was enough that he still had nightmares

about it sometimes.

That monster is Naoki.

That's what Takeshi's gut told him.

Naoki's trying to get revenge on us.

When Takeshi saw the blue figure, he'd screamed and run. Leaping through the first unlocked door he could find, he jumped into the wardrobe to hide. Soon after, he heard the door to the room open.

Stay away. Stay away.

He repeated the same words to himself over and over like a prayer. His knees wouldn't stop shaking. A scream sat deep in his throat trying to claw its way out, but he knew he'd be found the moment he made a sound. He hugged his knees with his right arm and used his left hand to cover his mouth.

Stay away! Stay away! Stay away! Stay away! Stay away!

Finally, he heard the sound of the door opening and closing again. He sighed in relief, thinking it had given up. He fearfully tried to leave the wardrobe, but his legs wouldn't move. The muscles in the lower half of his body had all gone limp like he'd been paralyzed.

Mika and the others arrived soon after, but Takeshi was in no condition to answer their questions. His nerves were shot from the fear. In truth, he wanted to leave with them more than anything. He couldn't walk on his own, so he'd need to lean on someone's shoulder. But the words wouldn't come out. Only begging and pleading. The more he struggled, the less he was able to convey. And so they'd disappeared, leaving him on his own again.

Those heartless jerks.

He was angry at the time, but when he heard Mika scream after they left, he silently thanked them for not dragging him along. Naoki's ghost must have attacked them too. It may have even killed them. If he'd run out with them, he likely would have been caught too. There was no telling where that thing was lying in wait. It might be safer just to hide in the wardrobe forever.

Takeshi disassembled a coat hanger in the wardrobe and wrapped one end of

the wire bit around the closet rod and the other end tightly around the necktie hook on the back of the wardrobe door. Now even if Naoki found him, he couldn't open the door without a fight.

Their parents would surely be concerned that they hadn't come home yet. Once the fact that Takuro had stolen the mansion key from his father came to light, they'd automatically figure out where they had gone.

I just have to wait right here for the grown-ups to rescue us.

Ever since he was a kid, Takeshi had been good at hide-and-seek. With his small and flexible body, he could hide in almost any cramped space. He was also a bit of a braggart and a loudmouth, so he had a nasty habit of getting into spats with the local punks and older delinquents. It was times like that that his ability to run and hide had really come in handy.

This is no different. Things will work out just fine.

Suddenly he heard the door to the room open.

Who was that?

Holding his breath, Takeshi strained his ears. He could hear large, plodding footsteps approaching the wardrobe. He was sure the giant was just on the other side of the door. Takeshi shut his eyes and mouth tightly, patiently waiting for the loitering monster to leave.

How long had he been there now?

Knock, knock, knock...

Suddenly there was a rapping at the wardrobe door. Takeshi nearly screamed but quickly covered his mouth.

Have I been found?

His heart was playing a beat of thirty-second notes. If that door opened, it was all over. Takeshi picked up the wooden piece of the coat hanger at his feet and raised it, ready to strike. It was hardly an effective weapon, but it was better than being barehanded.

Knock, knock, knock...

The rapping started up again, this time much louder. Takeshi bit his lip, trying to keep a lid on the fear bubbling up inside him like nothing he'd ever felt before.

If it knows I'm in here, why doesn't it just try to open the door? Maybe... because it can't?

Takeshi recalled the crucifix hanging from the wardrobe handle and opened his eyes. That must be it. The cross must have the ability to ward off evil. That's why Naoki couldn't touch the handle and open the door.

Thank god. As long as I stay in here, I'll be okay.

He sighed in relief, but then...

Bam, bam!

The banging on the door picked up.

It's pointless. I'm never coming out. I'm not going to let you kill me!

Bam! Bam!

The intensity of the banging only increased. It got so loud and violent that Takeshi began to worry the creature would just beat down the door.

Disappear, disappear, disappear!

Covering his ears, he prayed with all his might.

Disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear!

Fear gave way to desperation, and Takeshi did his best to comfort himself.

I'm not going to die here. I'm going home alive. I'm going home. I'm going home...

And then everything went quiet like his prayers had been answered.

Did it give up?

Wiping away his tears, Takeshi did his best to focus all of his will on his ears.

"Takeshi? It's Takeshi, isn't it?"

He heard a familiar voice on the other side of the door.

“Mom?”

“Thank goodness, Takeshi! So this is where you were hiding...”

Hearing his mother’s soft voice made his lower lip quiver.

I’m saved!

“Hold on. I’ll open the door right now.”

He excitedly unwound the wire he’d rigged to hold the door shut.

“I’m surprised you found me. What about the restaurant? We had a lot of reservations tonight, didn’t we?”

In his hurry, he accidentally pricked his finger on the end of the wire. A bright red bead of blood formed, but this was no time to be squabbling about a little finger prick.

“Just give me a second. I’m almost done untying this. There, I’m done.”

As he spoke, the door slowly started to open. The light from the room poured into the dark wardrobe.

“Let’s get out of here. This place is full of monsters. Mom—”





FOUND
YOU,
TAKESHI.

Through the narrow gap of the open door, he could see a giant, bloodshot eye staring at him.

“Aaahhhhh!”

As he screamed, a fierce blow struck him on the forehead. There, his consciousness faded as everything went black.

2

How many times had Takeshi screamed now? The more it happened, the more tiresome the sound became. It wasn't unlike the boy who cried wolf.

"I wish he'd just stop," Mika said in a low voice.

She must have felt the same way Shun did. She looked like she'd just been forced to eat a bug.

"No, listen closer," Hiroshi interjected. "It's a little different from his earlier screams."

Shun cupped his hand to his ear at Hiroshi's request. As he did, Takeshi's screaming suddenly cut off. It was followed by a strange grinding noise that resonated sickly against his eardrums. He'd heard something similar once when he visited a soba restaurant with his mother. It was just like the sound of a millstone turning. But it only lasted for a few moments. Then a bestial howl thundered through the halls.

"...What was that?" Mika's asked, her large eyes opening wide.

"Let's check it out."

The three of them headed up the stairs, bumping shoulders roughly along the way as they went in search of what they knew would be nothing good.

"What is that smell?" Mika asked as she wrinkled her shapely nose and frowned.

A strange stench was wafting through the halls of the second floor. One that hadn't been there before. Shun could swear he'd smelled something similar recently. But what was it? He tried to remember, but a piercing pain shot through his temple.

Before long, they found themselves in front of the room with the rats. The strange sound had ceased. So had Takeshi's screams. An ominous silence fell over the area.

"Hold on," Mika called out as they were about to open the door. "What if that

ghost is in there?”

“That’s actually what I’m hoping for,” Hiroshi replied quite seriously.

“Huh? Don’t be stupid. I don’t want to be chased by that creepy thing again.”

“But if we don’t get some kind of information from it, we won’t be able to escape from here.”

“What? Are you saying it’s what locked us in here?”

“Most likely.”

Mika’s tone became panicked at his suggestion.

“Are you serious? We can’t talk to that thing. I doubt it even understands words.”

“You shouldn’t judge a book by its cover. In most cases, that only leads to misjudging the subject’s true nature,” Hiroshi explained calmly, then turned the doorknob without hesitation and pushed.

Even with the door only cracked open, a great stench escaped the room. It was just like rusted iron... Shun finally realized it was the smell of blood.

“Wait!”

He quickly tried to stop Hiroshi, but it was too late. The door swung wide open to reveal a giant horde of the strange rats chowing down on something with gusto. Numbers-wise, it dwarfed the mass of them they saw earlier. There were so many of them now that Shun first thought it looked like a blue rug had been laid in the room. A chill went down his spine.

The stench only grew stronger and fouler. Shun could barely stand to look at the scene before him. Mika covered her mouth with both hands and ran into the hall without saying a word.

“This is amazing.”

Instead of recoiling in horror, however, Hiroshi stepped into the room. The proliferation of the mutant rats seemed to catch his interest. Hundreds of bloodshot eyes swiveled to glare at him, and menacing squeaking could be heard from the collective mass. Their front teeth bared, the rats looked ready

to attack at any moment. One of the larger rats broke away from the horde and darted for Hiroshi.

“Be careful, Hiroshi.”

It took all Shun had just to say that much. He felt completely frozen otherwise. He couldn't even move a single step from the doorway.

“I found this in the dining hall. It should help.”

As straight-faced as ever, Hiroshi pulled out a lighter from his pants pocket. He ignited the flame and flashed it at the approaching rat. Frightened by the sudden display, it turned tail and scampered under the bed. The other rats, sensing danger from their leader's actions, scattered simultaneously. A few passed by Shun's feet and dashed into the hall.

When the rats dispersed, it revealed the mysterious lump of meat they'd been chewing on. It was somewhat cylindrical, but the underside was smashed to a bloody pulp. If they tried to lift it up, it looked like it would just fall apart. The floor beneath it was bright red, and red rat footprints radiated outward from it. But what jumped out at them above all else was the difference in size between this mass and the arm they'd found under the bed. It appeared to be a human leg.

Hiroshi picked up a sneaker that was lying near what was probably the foot of the leg. He wiped away the blood on it with his palm, revealing a familiar logo. This had to be Takeshi's other shoe.

“No way...”

Shun's imagination jumped to the worst possible conclusion, but he couldn't voice it. He was afraid that the moment he did, it would become reality. Surely that piece of meat on the ground wasn't Takeshi or any part of him. There was just no way, right? It just wasn't possible.

Shun desperately tried to chase away the terrifying thoughts lurking in the back of his mind. Rationally speaking, the fleshy mass on the floor before them had to be from the same person the arm had come from. The rats were just eating the corpse of someone else that had been left here long ago. Or perhaps what Shun saw before wasn't really an arm after all. There was a possibility that

he'd been mistaken. Maybe the rats were just eating the corpse of some creature that had wandered into the mansion and gotten trapped here. What he'd seen was just a trick of the light, or maybe it was his fearful imagination playing tricks on him that just made it look like it was human...

Thud.

Shun looked up when he heard something from inside the wardrobe. Hiroshi looked over too, tightly gripping the sneaker in his hands.

"...Takeshi?"

Summoning his courage, Shun stepped into the room and cautiously called out to his classmate. But no answer came.

"We chased away the rats. There's no need to worry now," Hiroshi said as he opened the wardrobe door.

Frightened by the sudden light pouring in, a rat jumped out of it and scampered under the bed. When it did, a round object toppled out of the wardrobe and bounced on the floor.

"Takeshi...?"

Shun's voice squeaked as the air in his lungs leaked out through his throat. He really wanted to scream, but his vocal chords seemed to be frozen.

It was indeed Takeshi that had fallen from the closet. Part of him, at least. His head lay on the floor. Everything below the neck was missing. His tongue, purple and hanging out from between his lips, looked like an escaping slug. There was a mocking look still lingering in his eyes, but no derisive comments or jokes to back it up. He just continued to stare up at Shun, a thin smile on his lips.

...What is this?

Shun himself began to smile, almost as if it was infectious. He leaned back against the wall and let out a small chuckle. He knew it wasn't the right time, but it was like his body was acting on its own.

There's no way this is reality. It has to be a dream. It's all a dream.

That's what Shun was desperate to believe.

“What in the world could have happened here?” Hiroshi, who had remained calm throughout everything so far, looked worried for the first time. “Am I dreaming?”

Shun answered, still smiling, “Yeah, this is a dream. Not yours, Hiroshi, but mine. Sorry. I didn’t mean for you to get mixed up in my craziness.”

“Why are things happening just like in the game? I don’t think it’s a simple coincidence.”

“...The game?”

Sharp pain shot from his right temple directly to his left. With a throb, a locked drawer in Shun’s memory bank suddenly flew open. He finally understood the sense of déjà vu he’d been getting from time to time while walking around the mansion. How could he have possibly forgotten? He was so disappointed in himself that his own patheticness made him angry.

A group of middle school students come to a mansion after hearing rumors that monsters live there. They get trapped inside, and as they search for a way to escape, a blue monster attacks them. Scrambling for an exit, they get eaten by the monster one by one... That was the story of the computer game Shun made.

“This must be a dream...” he whispered. “That’s the only possibility.”

What a nightmare. Please let me wake up already.

“This is a dream, a dream... It’s a dream... It has to be a dream... A dream...” he almost chanted, clutching at his head. “A dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream, a dream...”

A warm liquid dripped down his cheek. Wiping it away, he was surprised to see something bright red on his fingers. He’d been clawing his head so hard that his nails had broken his skin.

This isn’t a dream... It’s real.

Takeshi’s lifeless head was still looking up at him and grinning.

“Aaahhhhhhhh!”

Screaming as if he were possessed, Shun slapped his own cheeks. But he didn't wake up. All he felt was a stinging pain. There was no denying it now. It was all real.

Chapter 9

GISHINANKI

Unending Nightmare

- 1.) (Shortening of “gishinanki wo shouzu”) Paranoia that leads to fear and doubt of even the smallest things; jumping at shadows

1

Could this be my fault?

That was all Shun could think as he put his hands over his burning cheeks. Everything that had happened to them so far was eerily similar to the events of his computer game.

I'm... an idiot.

He wanted to curse himself to death for not realizing that before Hiroshi pointed it out.

But maybe there was nothing I could have done about it.

Whenever Shun saw Takuro, it flipped a switch in his brain. It put him in survival mode. He relied on instinct without thinking, but that was exactly what had brought tragedy on them all. If he'd realized sooner that what was happening at the mansion paralleled his game, he could have stopped them all before going inside.

No, there was no way. Shun shook his head.

Even if he'd had some semblance of cognizance left, it would have been impossible for him to predict the disaster awaiting them before they entered. The mansion in his game was modeled after the Jailhouse, so it was only natural that they looked similar. It was perhaps just a coincidence that the interior and the arrangement of the manor were similar too.

In total, the game had four characters. The player could input their own name for the main character, but the three NPCs were named Takuro, Mika, and Takeshi after his classmates. But in reality, six of them had come to mansion, including himself and Anna. That was another reason Shun hadn't realized the connection sooner.

But why had he turned people he was so afraid of that he said his prayers every time they crossed paths into video game characters in the first place? Even he didn't know. Was it a tiny bit of revenge for all the bullying? Mika and Takeshi hung out with Takuro a lot, so it was easy to lump them in with Takuro.

And Takuro...

"Did you make this? You little turd!"

Shun recalled how he'd responded to the game.

"New kid. I see what you really think of me now."

The first one to die in his game was Takuro, who had his head chewed off by the creepy monster. It was no wonder he had smashed Shun's laptop.

But it's not my fault...

That's what Shun told himself now. Even if he'd noticed the similarities upon entering the mansion, there was no way he could have known a blue monster would attack them.

So... it's not my fault Takeshi died.

He had to make himself believe that. It might break him otherwise.

I only killed Takeshi and Takuro in my game. And besides... the first one to be killed in my game was Takuro, not Takeshi. Not everything mirrors the game, so there's no reason for me to feel responsible, right?

Pressing his hand to his chest, Shun tried to calm his racing heart.

Nothing that's happened in this mansion has anything to do with the game I made. I didn't kill Takeshi. It wasn't me. It wasn't me.

The blue monster that attacked everyone was just unconsciously inspired by sightings of blue rats and things around the Jailhouse. Takeshi had hidden himself in a wardrobe just like he did in the game, but that was easy to predict based on how much of a coward he was. It wasn't odd in the slightest that that was what he'd actually done.

As he thought things through, Shun's pulse finally began to slow. The Shun who had tried to escape reality by convincing himself that this was all a dream was gone now. Now he looked around, instead trying to calmly analyze the situation for what it was.

What in the world is going on here?

He turned his gaze to the severed head on the floor. It was hard to look

directly at it, but he had to make sure it was really Takeshi.

“This must be one of Takuro’s pranks,” Shun said to Hiroshi, who was squatted down and studying Takeshi’s head. “After you left the swamp today, Takuro showed up. He played a little of my game. I... don’t think he liked me using his name without permission. That’s why he’s dressing up as the monster from my game and trying to scare us.”

Hiroshi didn’t respond. He just continued to seriously study what was once Takeshi. Still, Shun continued to speak. It was unlike him, but if he didn’t keep talking, he felt like his heart would give out at any moment.

“He must have decided to scare me after spotting me in the yard and thought up this plan. After locking the front door so I couldn’t escape, he dressed up as the blue giant and has just been enjoying scaring me this whole time.”

In truth, Shun had only seen a silhouette through clouded glass and caught a glimpse of something from behind. It could have easily been Takuro in a costume. If nothing else, it was suspicious that they hadn’t run into him once since they parted ways in the entrance hall. The mansion was big, but it was inconceivable that Takuro hadn’t heard Takeshi’s anguished cries.

He must be hiding somewhere, watching me cower in fear. With that nasty grin plastered on his face, no doubt.

Were Takeshi and Mika in on it as well? No, they didn’t seem to be acting. Most likely they’d just gotten mixed up in Takuro’s plans for Shun and become victims themselves. Shun recalled how Mika had run out into the hall with her hands clasped over her mouth. He felt responsible.

“So... that severed head, the leg-like chunk of flesh, and even that arm we found earlier are just fakes, even though they look real. Maybe there’s meat or something inside them to attract the rats.”

He’d know once he touched it. Shun squatted down next to Hiroshi and reached out for the severed head. It was gross, but he wasn’t scared. After all, it was merely an elaborate fake. It would just be like touching the anatomical model in the science prep room. Shun ran his fingertips along the severed head’s cheek. As he did, he let out a scream like a hiccup.

The skin was soft. It was cold, but it wasn't rubber or plastic. Summoning his courage, he pressed harder against it until he felt a cheekbone. It wasn't fake after all.

Shun whipped his arm back, recoiling violently. He jumped back, his back slamming into the wall so hard that it knocked the wind out of him for a moment. Hiroshi looked at him with surprise.

His back still pressed flat against the wall, Shun gave the severed head another look. Dark roots could be seen at the ends of the bleached-blond hairs. Traces of acne dotted the forehead, and peach fuzz sprouted under the nose. It was too real. There was no way it could be a fake.

"Hey... What's going on?" he asked, his voice shaky.

But Hiroshi just continued to look at him, not saying a thing. They locked eyes in bewildered silence as the seconds ticked by. Eventually, Takeshi's severed head moved even though no one had touched it.

"What?"

It quivered slightly, as if alive.

The impossible just keeps happening. If this isn't a nightmare, then what on earth is it? Hiroshi... You know, don't you? Why is a corpse moving? Is this a phenomenon explainable by science?

Surely Hiroshi would have answers. Shun wanted to ask him all kinds of questions, but he was no longer capable of forming words. The only thing that passed his lips was the faint sound of air escaping his lungs.

Takeshi's right eye, which was only slightly open, suddenly shifted. Incredulous, Shun jumped to his feet when the eye popped out of its socket. All kinds of fluids began pouring out of the now-open orifice. A blue rat, which had somehow snuck inside, then peered out from the eye socket. It looked at Shun and screeched unpleasantly. Something the color of whitebait was dangling from its mouth. Its cheeks appeared to be stuffed with whatever it was. Narrowing its eyes as if smiling happily, the rat began chewing the sticky substance with nasty, wet smacking sounds.

Is that... Takeshi's...?

The contents of Shun's stomach rushed up his esophagus and nearly burst from his mouth.

I can't do this. I can't take it.

Shun stood up and fled from the room, running into the hall.

2

Dashing into the room still open at the end of the west hall, Shun leaned over the sink. In a cold sweat, he retched again and again. Then he heard something.

Lifting his head, he glanced at the secondary door in the room. If this bathroom was like the one on the first floor, the toilet would be on the other side. It appeared to be locked from the inside though, as a red sign saying “occupied” was visible below the doorknob. Straining his ears, Shun could hear the faint sounds of a girl sobbing coming from within.

“...Are you okay?” he asked as he knocked on the door.

“Who’s there?” The voice, though a little ragged from crying so much, was definitely Mika’s.

“It’s me... Shun,” he answered and knocked again.

“Stop it!” she shouted, overwhelmed and hysterical. “Leave me alone! Stop bothering me!”

“But...”

But he couldn’t just leave her. Takeshi was dead. Murdered, even. That much was clear. They had to get out of the mansion quickly or there might be another victim.

“I want to be alone! I like being by myself! Please go away!”

Something soft hit the door, perhaps a roll of toilet paper, and fell to the floor. Despite his reservations, there was really nothing Shun could do if Mika was this insistent. Prodding her in the wrong way could end up disastrous. He decided to keep Takeshi’s death a secret for the moment.

Really, Shun was a little jealous of Mika for immediately running to the bathroom. She hadn’t seen what the rats were eating or what had become of Takeshi. That ghastly scene was burned into Shun’s mind, never to fade or disappear. The hellish image reappeared every time he closed his eyes. He’d see Takeshi’s corpse now every night when he went to bed. He’d have to be careful not to fall asleep in class. That is... if he returned to his normal life. He would

have to escape first.

Giving up on changing Mika's mind, Shun left the washroom. As he walked down the hall, the metallic scent of blood grew stronger again. Wanting to avoid the sight of Takeshi's severed head, he turned and headed slowly down the stairs. The entrance hall was silent, much like how he'd left it. He tried the door, but it was still locked.

"Anna," he called out.

But there was no answer. Anna was still unaccounted for, just like Takuro. Shun checked the first floor bathroom again, but there were no clues as to Anna's whereabouts.

It can't be.

Stopping in the middle of the hall, Shun looked up. Sweat dripped down his temple and he felt sick. Hurriedly suppressing the memory of Takeshi's remains trying to resurface, he calmed his rapid breathing.

Could Anna have met the same fate? I've looked all over and can't find her. The possibility's not zero... Calm down, calm down, calm down.

Grabbing his chest, he repeated those words to himself.

Once he regained some of his composure, he cleared his mind. Who exactly killed Takeshi? Blue-skinned monsters didn't actually exist. It was only an imaginary creature from his game. The giant Shun had seen was Takuro in disguise, most likely.

That moved the suspicion onto Takuro. Was he the one that killed Takeshi? It wasn't unthinkable. He didn't exactly place a high value on human life. After all, he'd almost killed Shun just the other day. He'd ordered him to jump from the school's third floor, and he'd obeyed. If he'd landed the wrong way, he could have died. But Takuro just would have laughed. Shun didn't hesitate to think he could chop up a body without batting an eye.

But then what was his motive? Pure curiosity? Had he taken Takeshi's head in one of his sick "experiments"? If that were the case though, wouldn't he have used Shun as a test subject instead of Takeshi? He had to consider another motive.

“Oh...” Shun gasped as he remembered something.

“I’m sorry, Naoki. Forgive me... Forgive me... I told him to stop. But... But Takuro...”

And it wasn’t just Takeshi’s words. There was also what Mika had coldly said to the half-crazed, sniveling Takeshi curled up in the wardrobe.

“Are you sure about this? Say any more and Takuro might kill you.”

Naoki was possessed by something from the Jailhouse. It was the curse that made him run out into the road. Those were the rumors surrounding his death at school. They had all come from Takeshi’s claim that he saw Naoki dashing out of the Jailhouse right before the accident, but Takeshi was a liar. None of the rumors were true. Naoki had jumped in front of the truck because that’s what Takuro told him to do.

Takuro, thinking of it as just another experiment, had given the order callously and without hesitation. But things had turned out much worse than he’d imagined. The accident caused the deaths of seven people. No one could know he’d been involved. That’s why he forced Takeshi to spread false rumors, and as a result, no one ever suspected his involvement.

Still, Takeshi was a bigmouth and that made him a liability for Takuro. Takeshi could have said anything. He ran off at the mouth so much it wasn’t hard to imagine him saying, “All that stuff I said about Naoki was a lie. Takuro made me do it.” There was no guarantee he wouldn’t let the truth slip just like that. In fact, Takeshi had even blabbed while they were in the entrance hall until Takuro silenced him with a glare. Shun recalled those eyes, filled with malice. *“I can’t let Takeshi live. Maybe I should kill him right now.”* It wouldn’t surprise him at all if that’s what Takuro had really been thinking.

Here in the Jailhouse, Takuro could use the spirit haunting the place as cover for Takeshi’s murder. Shun and the others would all be witnesses. They would say they’d been attacked by a monster. They’d seen it for themselves. The cops wouldn’t know what to think. It would sound like they were all crazy, which would work out quite well for Takuro. Even better if they actually believed there was a real monster involved.

One unbelievable thing had happened after another since coming to the

mansion, but considering the possibility that it was all Takuro's doing, it all sort of started to make sense. Shun was now convinced that was what was going on.

Which means...

"Anna's in danger," Shun whispered.

Anna knew that Takuro was involved in the accident last year. It was his fault her parents were dead, so she couldn't just sit by and do nothing when she saw him up to no good again. What if she had confronted him? This was Takuro, after all. He'd try to silence her just like he had with Takeshi.

Where is Anna? I have to find her quickly.

Shun grabbed the knob to the closest door and pulled with all his might. But it did nothing. It seemed to be locked and wouldn't open.

When Shun looked up, he saw a panel engraved with the symbol "α" affixed to the door. It was the Greek letter alpha. Each door had a panel with a different letter from the Greek alphabet on it. The one he'd first thought was "p" earlier was actually "ρ," the Greek letter rho. The sign on the room upstairs where Takeshi's head lay had a character on it that looked something like a wooden sandal. It was "π," or pi. Looking to the next door over, Shun saw the Greek letter "θ," or theta. Just like in his game.

It felt so strange that he'd forgotten about it. A thin fog still hung over his mind. Had something happened to him? Had he hit his head or something? He began to worry that there were other things he was failing to remember.

Most of the doors were locked with no way to open them. The rooms that weren't locked didn't seem to have anyone in them. After investigating all the doors in one hall, Shun decided to check the next.

Turning left in front of the suit of armor in the entrance hall, he reached a door to a room he hadn't been in before. It was a large, wide room lined with twenty tatami mats. In the middle of the room lay the hand truck Takuro had brought, toppled over on its side. The cardboard boxes, however, were nowhere in sight.

Further into the Japanese-style room was a sliding door with a painting of a crane on it, and Shun had a sinking feeling about what lay beyond. In his game,

this sliding door hid a staircase that led to the basement. Recalling Mika complaining about Takuro stepping on the tatami mats with his shoes on, Shun hesitantly proceeded forward. Cutting straight across the room, he opened the sliding door.

“No way...” he said breathlessly.

He couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was dark and dingy on the other side. The ceiling, the walls, the floor... Everything was made of bare concrete. The room seemed chilly just looking at it. And in the middle of it all was indeed a square opening with a staircase leading underground.

3

“Who’s there?” Takuro’s voice echoed from below.

He must have noticed someone was upstairs because of the light shining in from the Japanese-style room. The stairs were dark, however, so there was no way for Shun to see Takuro from where he was standing.

“Ah... Ah...”

The second he heard Takuro’s voice, Shun was unable to speak. That was normal, but it was even more pronounced now that he knew Takuro had murdered Takeshi in such a gory fashion. Turning on his heels, Shun made a break for it.

“Hey, wait!”

Shun heard the sound of someone climbing the stairs behind him. If Takuro caught him, he’d end up like Takeshi too. The image of Takeshi’s remains, including his right eye rolling across the floor, resurfaced in his mind.

No. I don’t want to end up like that.

Fleeing the room at top speed, Shun streaked down the hall and up the stairs. He wasn’t athletic at all. Years of sitting in front of a computer had caused his stamina to wither away. His legs moved awkwardly beneath him and his heart felt as if it were going to jump out of his chest, but he couldn’t stop.

Mika was leaning against a boarded-up window on the second floor. Seeing Shun scramble up the stairs white as a sheet, her eyes went wide. Her normally perfect complexion was now ashen. Her eyelids were dark and puffy, and her hair that she took such pride in was now a chaotic mess.

Passing in front of her, Shun dashed into the room with Takeshi’s head. He’d rather not have to see the grisly sight again, but it was preferable to becoming Takuro’s next victim. Entering the room, Shun saw Hiroshi still squatting in much the same way as before. Did he not care about the smell? Or the fact that there was a severed head? Either way, he was intensely studying what used to be Takeshi.

Averting his eyes so that he wouldn't actually have to see anything himself, Shun moved around to the other side of Hiroshi. Mika was standing just beyond the open door. Even Takuro wouldn't attack with so many witnesses.

"What's that smell?" Takuro asked from the hallway. "Hey. Did you open up the Japanese-style room earlier?"

He seemed to be talking to Mika.

"Huh? What're you talking about? I was in the bathroom this whole time," she answered, sounding annoyed.

"Really? If you're lying, I'll find out soon enough."

"What're making that scary face for? Did something bad happen down there?"

Takuro's voice faltered for a second. His silence spoke volumes. What had he been doing in the basement? If Anna was there...

"Then did someone come through here just now?"

Shun gasped. This was bad. Prepared to be ratted out, he grimaced.

"No, no one," Mika said bluntly in an odd display of tact.

"You swear?"

"Why would I lie at a time like this?"

Mika was snappy, but her answer seemed to satisfy Takuro. He didn't inquire further about who had been in the Japanese-style room.

"So what're you doing here, Mika?"

"I considered hiding in the bathroom forever, but I was too nervous on my own so I came back out. Then... Takeshi's..." She said no more and simply pointed into the room.

"Takeshi?"

A few footsteps could be heard, and then Takuro's head appeared in the doorway. Shun ducked behind Hiroshi's back. It wasn't enough to hide him, but he couldn't help it. His body reacted on instinct.

“Whoa. What the hell is this?” Takuro asked, pinching his nose to try and block out the foul smell.

“It’s Takeshi’s head. A rat took his eye, though,” Hiroshi answered like it was no big deal.

“...Is he dead?”

“I do believe it would be quite difficult to survive in his current condition.”

“Where’s his body?”

“I don’t know. We found what appeared to be his left leg from the knee down, but there’s no sign of the rest of him. Not in this room, at least.”

“H-Hold on a second. What’s going on here? I don’t understand. Explain from the beginning.”

Takuro looked rattled, which confused Shun somewhat. He cocked his head to the side quizzically as he observed him. He’d killed Takeshi, hadn’t he? So was this all an act? If it was, he was a remarkable actor.

“Unfortunately, we hardly know anything either. We can’t really explain it,” Hiroshi replied plainly.

“First of all, where have you been this whole time?” Mika asked heatedly. “You brought us all here! Where were you while we were all getting the crap scared out of us?”

Shun cheered and applauded for Mika internally. She’d asked exactly what he wanted to know too.

“I was... moving the package,” Takuro said almost sheepishly.

“The package?”

“The cardboard boxes on the hand truck. You all disappeared on me, so I had to move them into the basement alone.”

Shun didn’t miss the fact that Takuro looked away when he answered. He was hiding something. Whatever it was, it was in the basement.

“More importantly, what happened to Takeshi? Why’s it just his head? Where’d the rest of him go?” Takuro asked no one in particular with spit flying

as he scratched his head.

It was an odd sight since he was usually so picky about his appearance—especially his hair. Was it a sign of how flustered he was?

“The rats carried his left leg away.”

Unlike Takuro, however, Hiroshi was still completely calm.

“Rats? Are they big enough to carry away a leg?”

“Size is relative to species. Beavers are also included in the order Rodentia, you see. Limiting ourselves to the most narrow view of rodents, however, these were bigger than Mongolian gerbils but smaller than black rats. I’d guess they were, on average, about twelve centimeters in length. Well, I suppose you wouldn’t include the tail in this situation, so—”

“Anyway, there were a lot of them,” Mika said, cutting Hiroshi off. She was sure they’d all be getting a lecture on rats otherwise. “According to Hiroshi, there were over a hundred. With that many, they could probably carry anything.”

Mika’s expression grew pale as she spoke, as if imagining such a sight. She uncomfortably rubbed her throat.

“Are you saying Takeshi was attacked by rats, and that’s why he’s in little pieces now?”

“No, that’s incorrect.” Pointing to the severed part of Takeshi’s neck, Hiroshi continued, “If that were the case, there would be dozens of fine teeth marks along the wound. But I haven’t found a trace of a single one.”

“Then how did Takeshi end up like this?”

“I was puzzled as well, so I inspected the remains quite thoroughly.”

“I thought you didn’t care about people.”

“I simply don’t care much for living humans. Once they’re dead, however, they’re not much different from other animals.” The corners of Hiroshi’s lips curled slightly. “After inspecting Takeshi’s head, I discovered that all the skin and muscle around his neck was twisted in the same direction. It’s as if some powerful force yanked his head off.”

“Someone yanked his head off? What the hell?” Takuro snorted. “You saying some monstrously strong guy lives here?”

“That’s right. There’s a blue-skinned giant!” Mika shouted hoarsely.

“Huh? What’re you babbling about? You hallucinating or something?”

“You didn’t see it? Of course not. That’s why you’re still so calm. But whether you saw it or not, this mansion really is haunted!”

“Haunted? By the spirit of that wheelchair girl? Even if you’re for real, that’s not scary at all. I’ll take care of—”

“No! That’s not it! Naoki’s here! He killed Takeshi!”

The moment Mika mentioned their classmate who’d been hit by a truck and killed, Takuro’s expression changed.

“Naoki’s behind all of this. He’s getting his revenge. Takuro, we have to hurry and get out of here or you’ll be killed too.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What could he possibly have against me?”

“Don’t play dumb! Do you think I don’t know anything? Takeshi’s such a blabbermouth, there’s no way he kept a secret like that to himself!”

“Hey, shut up, Mika.” Takuro reached out, put his hand on Mika’s shoulder, and forced her against the wall out in the hallway. “If you say any more...”

“I’m saying it because I’m worried about you! Please believe me. This was all Naoki, and he’ll kill you next. You have to get out of here.”

“So it’s Naoki’s ghost or something, huh? Well, that’s interesting. If he’s here, I’ll handle him. A loser like him could never get the better of me.”

“No, you don’t stand a chance. Please apologize to him.”

“Why should I apologize to that dweeb?”

“You told him to jump out into traffic, didn’t you? You said he should run in front of that truck to test his bravery, and if all went well, you wouldn’t bully him anymore. That’s why he—”

A dull thud echoed down the hallway. Mika crumpled to the floor. Her cheek swelled and reddened as a trail of blood dripped from the corner of her mouth.

Takuro looked down at her, his fist still curled tightly. His face, full of anger, seemed to chill the air. Even Hiroshi, who had been intently studying Takeshi's remains, sensed something was off and raised his head to look and see what was going on. Shun held his breath as he watched, waiting to see what would happen next.

"...You're the worst," Mika muttered. She slowly stood up, not bothering to wipe the blood dripping down her chin. "Maybe it was actually you who killed Takeshi because you were scared he'd let the cat out of the bag about Naoki."

"Shut up. If you keep pressing your luck, you'll be next."

Takuro nearly growled at Mika. His voice was low and rough like a yawn from the depths of hell. Shun gasped. But Mika didn't back down.

"Look, your real colors are shining through. Takuro, there's definitely something wrong with you. You hurt people and call it 'experimenting.' Naoki and the new kid are people too, you know. Just like you and me. Don't you understand that they aren't bugs?"

Shun was shocked to suddenly hear her talking about him.

"You wouldn't hesitate to twist off someone's head since that's how you treat people. Like they're not even human."

"If you don't shut your mouth right now..."

Takuro's voice quivered with rage. Shun couldn't see his face because his back was turned toward the door, but there was no doubt he was staring Mika down with the deadly glare of a raging demon.

"What? You'll kill me?" Mika said mockingly. "Sorry, but I'm not going to be killed by you or Naoki. I'm getting out of this place if it's the last thing I do. And once I'm out, I'm going straight to the police and telling them everything. You better prepare yourself."

And with that, she turned her back to Takuro.

"Hey, wait," he called, taking a step forward and trying to grab her shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" Mika said loudly, nearly screaming.

Even Takuro was taken aback. He paused for a second, and Mika used that

opportunity to dash down the hall away from him.

“I said wait!”

Takuro quickly gave chase. Soon, Shun could no longer hear their footsteps.

This is bad. Mika's going to be killed.

He started to panic.

“What should we do?”

Shun looked to Hiroshi for answers, but his attention had already shifted back to the remains on the floor. His face was screwed up in a perplexed expression.

“Hey, Hiroshi, did you hear me?”

He didn't answer. It seemed whenever he started focusing, he stopped paying attention to his surroundings.

“His upper temple... The right side of his skull is cracked slightly. It's close to the corpus callosum. Simply bumping one's head wouldn't cause this much damage.” Peering into the gaping eye socket, Hiroshi muttered, “It looks as if some long object was pressed against here, but without considerable strength, this wouldn't be...”

Holding Takeshi's head with both hands, Hiroshi continued to talk to himself. For the first time, Shun felt scared of him. No normal person could do something like that. No one would want to. But Hiroshi... The look in his eyes as he gazed at what Takeshi had become was no different from the intense interest he showed when studying the blue grasshopper or the rats.

“I have absolutely no interest in the ecology of humans.”

Shun recalled what Hiroshi had said.

“I simply don't care much for living humans. Once they're dead, however, they're not much different from other animals.”

Suddenly, a chill ran up his spine.

“You wouldn't hesitate to twist off someone's head since that's how you treat people. Like they're not even human.”

That was what Mika had said about Takuro, but didn't it also apply to Hiroshi?

“I... have to go.”

Shun stood up and, careful not to make a sound, quickly exited the room. Stopping in front of the door, he turned back toward Hiroshi. He hadn't moved. His eyes were still fixed on the severed head.

Chapter 10

KIKI

Danger

1.) A fearful presence that causes one's hairs to stand on end



1

Escaping from the room, Shun walked down the hall until he heard Takuro and Mika shouting.

“Damn it! No matter how many times we try, it won’t open.”

“Give me a break! I just want to go home! My Persian kitty, Heart, is probably starving. If she dies, this is your fault. Takuro, this is all your fault! Yours!”

“Ow! Don’t hit me. Calm down, stupid.”

They both sounded quite irritated that the door still wouldn’t open, but rather than fighting, it seemed more like Mika was crying hysterically and Takuro was trying to calm her down. Shun’s fear that Mika was going to be killed appeared to be unfounded. For the moment, it would be okay to leave them alone. There was nothing he could do by butting in, after all. He’d prefer to not get mixed up in any more quarrels anyway.

Shun looked around briefly and decided to climb the stairs to the next floor. He hadn’t checked the third floor yet. There was still a tiny chance that they could escape through a window. Fortunately, he already had experience jumping from high places. He might twist his ankle again, but that was far preferable to becoming rat food.

Careful not to make a sound, Shun hurried up to the third floor. As he ascended the stairs, he wondered who could have killed Takeshi. Only a few moments ago, he had been dead sure it was Takuro. He was the only one capable of doing something so horrific, and he had motive. If the killer was trying to pin the blame on the blue monster, it would have to be someone that had seen his game. But the moment Takuro saw Takeshi’s severed head, he appeared to be seriously stricken. There was no way it was just acting.

Is it possible it’s someone else?

When he considered that, Hiroshi became the newest suspect in his mind. It was extremely difficult to get a read on him and his perpetual stoicism. Even when he found the corpse of a classmate, he hadn’t been perturbed in the slightest. Wasn’t that odd? Hiroshi was also familiar with Shun’s game, which,

considering the circumstances, was a strike against him. Any motive he had was still a mystery, but there were people in the world who killed for fun or sport. Nothing was really out of the question.

Pondering all this, Shun reached the third floor. It was constructed in much the same way as the first and second levels. Just like in Shun's game. First, he checked the windows. He'd had some small hope for them, but the third-floor windows also had thick planks covering them with huge nails bolting them in place. It would be quite a feat to remove them.

Next, he checked the doors as he came across them to see if any were unlocked. The third knob he tried turned. Giving it a push, he cautiously peered inside the room. Colorful, bold wallpaper decorated the interior. The room had a much different feel from the other somber rooms he'd been in so far. Poking his head through the door, he scanned the room. A strange sensation of nostalgia washed over him.

A cartoon character popular with little kids was printed on the carpet. The same character was on the bedspread of the child-sized bed and a plastic toy chest sitting in the corner of the room. A tall bookcase stood against the wall, and further in sat a study desk. All signs pointed to this being a child's bedroom, yet it was all strangely familiar to Shun. A peculiar tingling tickled him deep in his chest. The southern hall of the third floor. The second door from the west end. He remembered a child's room being in the same spot in his game.

Seeing that no one was inside, Shun stepped in. There wasn't a single speck of dust to be seen anywhere, as if someone had recently cleaned. He touched the blanket on the bed. It was soft, as if it had just come out of the dryer. According to rumor, a girl in a wheelchair used to live here long ago. Was this her room? No, if she was wheelchair-bound, then it would be strange to have her room on the third floor.

Shun checked the bookshelf and found orderly rows of old comics filling it. They were all series he'd loved in elementary school. The shelf underneath was crammed with illustrated study books for elementary students, biographies of great historical figures, and game magazines. Shun pulled out one of the magazines and looked at the cover. It was an issue published five years ago. Odd. That conflicted with the story that no one had lived in the mansion for

over twenty years.

Shun cocked his head quizzically to the side and casually flipped through the pages. He stopped when he happened upon a guide for an adventure game that was hugely popular during his elementary school days. How many times had this guide been read and reread? The page was filthy with fingerprints.

I remember being super into this.

The only weapon that could defeat the final boss was the Platinum Sword, and to get it you had to crack a code that changed with every playthrough. It was an arduous process, and Shun fondly remembered how he'd never tackle it without a magazine like this that published the key to solving it. Looking down at it, the page he'd opened to had a bunch of codes scrawled on it.

That's right... I used to furiously try and solve the code just like this.

He traced the thin letters that looked like trails left by tiny snails, then gasped. Thin penmanship. Angular letters. It was very similar to Shun's own handwriting. No, it was *exactly* like it. The lines of letters even tended to drift up and to the right just like his did.

Could this... actually be my magazine?

Raising his head, he checked the bookcase again. There were a few books he didn't remember, but most of them mirrored his personal collection. Upon closer inspection, the bookshelf also looked familiar. There was a sticker of a cartoon character stuck to one side, exactly where Shun had put one as a kid. There were also notches in the bookcase just like the ones he'd carved with a box-cutter back when he was in sixth grade to measure his height. There was no doubt. This bookcase was the one Shun had used in elementary school.

"What is this doing here?" Shun said breathlessly as he felt the marks in the wood.

It made no sense. All of his furniture should have been disposed of when his family moved to this town. The bookcase, the desk, the bed... Shun's heart skipped a beat. Gulping, he glanced around the room. The bed, the desk, and even the carpet were familiar too. They were all his. No wonder he'd felt nostalgic coming into this room.

The magazine toppled from his hands to the floor. He ran over to the desk and opened the top drawer. It was filled with stationery casually tossed inside, all the same styles he'd used in elementary school. The second drawer down contained stacks of printouts. He picked one up. It was a vocabulary test. Next to the score was his name... written in his handwriting.

"What is this? Someone's bad idea of a joke?" he asked, but there was no one there to answer.

Searching further, he discovered something unfamiliar in the shadow of a well-worn deck of cards. He took it out to take a better look at it. It was an old-fashioned brass key. A wooden card hung from the attached keyring with the symbol "σ" carved into it. He knew right away that it was the Greek letter sigma. Most likely by using this key, he could access a certain room in the mansion.

"Why..."

That was all he could mutter. His mind reeled in confusion. You could find a key in the child's room in his game too. Using it would allow you to open the door to the study. Who was doing this and what they were after, Shun had no idea. There was no telling how far the similarities between this mansion and the one in his game would go, but at this point, it was worth a try.

Gripping the key in his hand, Shun exited the room. At almost the same time, the door to the next room down the hall opened and someone emerged.

"Shun..."

She turned and looked at Shun in surprise. Her expression was quite haggard, but there was no mistaking that it was Anna.

2

"I'm glad you're safe."

Shun let out a sigh of relief to finally see Anna again. In reality it hadn't even been an hour since they'd parted ways in the entrance hall, but to Shun it felt like she'd been gone for days. He quickly glanced over her, but she thankfully didn't seem to be injured. A look of abject fear was plastered across her face, but that was to be expected. Wandering all alone through the mansion, she must have been frightened out of her mind.

"Where have you been? I was worried," Shun said as he approached her.

He smiled as wide as he could in an attempt to reassure her. But for some reason, when he took a step forward, she took a step back.

"...Anna?"

Thinking he was imagining things, he continued forward, but the distance between them remained the same. Puzzled, he looked into her eyes for an answer. But all he saw there was fear. She then turned her face away like a young child about to throw a tantrum. The biggest surprise yet, however, was what she said next.

"Don't come near me."

"...Huh?"

"I said don't come near me!" Anna nearly shouted, her fearful gaze directed squarely at Shun.

"Why?" he couldn't help but ask. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Maybe she'd experienced something so terrifying that she'd lost the ability to reason. Shun spoke softly so as not to spook her further.

"Will you stay calm and listen to me? We have to escape from here as quickly as possible. Things have gotten bad."

"I know. I found Takeshi downstairs."

She grimaced, like the very thought of the tragic scene pained her.

“How...” Her lips trembling, she looked Shun in the eyes. “How could you do that?”

“Huh?” Shun was at a loss for words.

“I know you hated them all. And I considered myself guilty too for knowing you were being bullied but doing nothing to help. But... did you really need to go that far? Well? Are you going to kill me too?”

She seemed to be getting more and more worked up the more she talked. By the end, she was practically shouting.

“H-Hold on.” Shun searched for the right words, but Anna glaring at him made him nervous. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. Do you... think I killed Takeshi?”

“That’s the only explanation, isn’t it?” she shrieked.

“I just can’t understand why you’d think that.”

“Don’t play dumb! Will you just stop all this? Let us out of here now!”

Shun couldn’t get his head around this sudden change in Anna’s behavior. As he watched her, he could see the head of a tiny shiba inu poking out from her blouse pocket.

“This keychain looks just like you, Shun, so I couldn’t stop myself from buying it. It was a set of two, so I’ll give you one.”

Anna had been so friendly to him before. What was going on now?

“We’re birds of a feather, aren’t we?”

Where had the girl who’d said that gone?

“I didn’t do anything. You’re mistaken. Can you tell me why you’d think that? I want to try and convince you otherwise.”

“The cardboard box,” she stated bluntly.

“Huh?”

“I looked inside the cardboard box Takuro brought here. I’d been wondering about it all along.”

“...What was inside?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know everything, don’t you?”

“I don’t know anything. Why do you think that?”

“Because inside the box was your—”

She cut off there. Her eyes opened so wide that they looked like they’d fall out as she studied him. No, that wasn’t it. She was looking behind Shun.

“No... No more...” Anna’s body began to quiver.

“What? What’s wrong?”

Following her gaze, Shun turned around. The door at the end of the hall was swinging open, and a thick arm stretched out of it. It was unusually muscular and blue like someone had painted it.

“...You’re kidding.”

Shun could only look on in shock as the unimaginable unfolded right in front of him. The giant blue creature exited the room, hunched over and looking cramped. In the hall, it stood up and slowly turned toward them.

The blue giant’s eyes were abnormally huge, just like the rats in the second-floor bedroom, and its body was horribly misshapen. It stood on two legs but it was hunched low, possibly because its head was too large. The first thing Shun imagined after seeing its creepy figure was the *Australopithecus* he’d seen in his world history textbook. Its giant eyes, which took up nearly half of its upper face, were glaring in his direction. The repulsion he felt from seeing it was so strong that it made him slightly dizzy. It sniffed the air, checking for a scent, and then the giant man—no, the grotesque monster—grinned smugly.

“Nooooo!” Anna screamed, overcome by fear, and took off running.

Taking that as a signal, the monster slowly began walking forward. Its pace seemed leisurely, but it was moving at a surprisingly fast clip. Moving like someone walking on a high-speed moving walkway, it zipped past Shun. It chased after Anna, not even giving Shun a second glance. The distance between them grew shorter and shorter as he watched the monster go after her.

Anna, having reached the east end of the hall, quickly tried the door to the

last room. But it was locked and wouldn't open. The giant was closing in fast. With her back pressed up against the door, Anna looked petrified. As the monster got closer to Anna, its large frame blocked Shun's view of her. Then came the sound of something being squashed. Red liquid splashed up against the door. Only the disgusting sound of chewing echoed in the otherwise silent hall. Hunched over, the monster was digging in to something.

"...Anna?"

Shun called her name feebly, but there was no answer.

"Stop it... Stop it, please..."

A hoarse voice escaped his throat.

Anna's... dying.

"Come talk to me if you're ever in need."

Anna, the girl who had kindly welcomed a shy new student like him.

"Your eyes look like a shiba inu's when you laugh. It's cute."

Just seeing her smile made him feel happy.

"We're birds of a feather."

He'd hoped they could grow even closer...

"Stoooooop!"

He knew it was too late, but his body moved on instinct. Sprinting down the hall, he jumped onto the monster's back. But Shun was weak. There was no way he could do anything against the monstrous giant. He was quickly sent flying.

His back slammed into a wall, knocking the wind out of him for a moment. His face twisted in pain, he tried to get up. The monster was already in front of him, looking down on him.

I'm going to be killed.

Shun sprung up, spun on his heels, and darted forward. There was no time to look back. He could tell the monster was chasing him.

It's coming. That monster's coming for me.

Mouth open wide, Shun gasped for as much oxygen as possible as he ran as fast as his legs would carry him. A monster that eats people. If it caught him, it was game over. He wondered if he should run into the room the monster had appeared from. Something could be lying in wait there. But if he stood still, he'd end up meeting the same fate as Anna. Shun took a hard turn and ducked into the room next to the child's bedroom—the one Anna had been hiding in.

Inside was mostly just a large rug covering the floor. There was hardly any furniture. It was terribly dreary. The only thing that stood out was the wardrobe on the far side of the room. With the monster closing in, Shun had no choice but to hide there. There wasn't time for anything else. Shun cut across the room and jumped right in. Closing the door from the inside, he hugged his knees and held his breath just like Takeshi had done.

What was that monster? Was it what killed Takeshi? Had it attacked Hiroshi as well? Holding his breath, Shun prayed for Hiroshi's safety. And what about Takuro and Mika? He didn't like them much, but that didn't mean he wanted them dead. And... poor Anna. Balling his hands into tight fists, he bit his lower lip hard.

I liked her. I looked up to her. I was so happy we were growing closer, little by little. But now... Why did this have to happen?

The door to the room opened with a creak. Shun could sense something was approaching. His arms crossed in front of his chest, he begged his body to stop shaking.

Go away! Go away! Go away!

Shun desperately repeated the same words to himself in a chant. He heard the footsteps stop in front of the wardrobe, and then there was a strange, unearthly growl from the other side of the wardrobe door.

It's over.

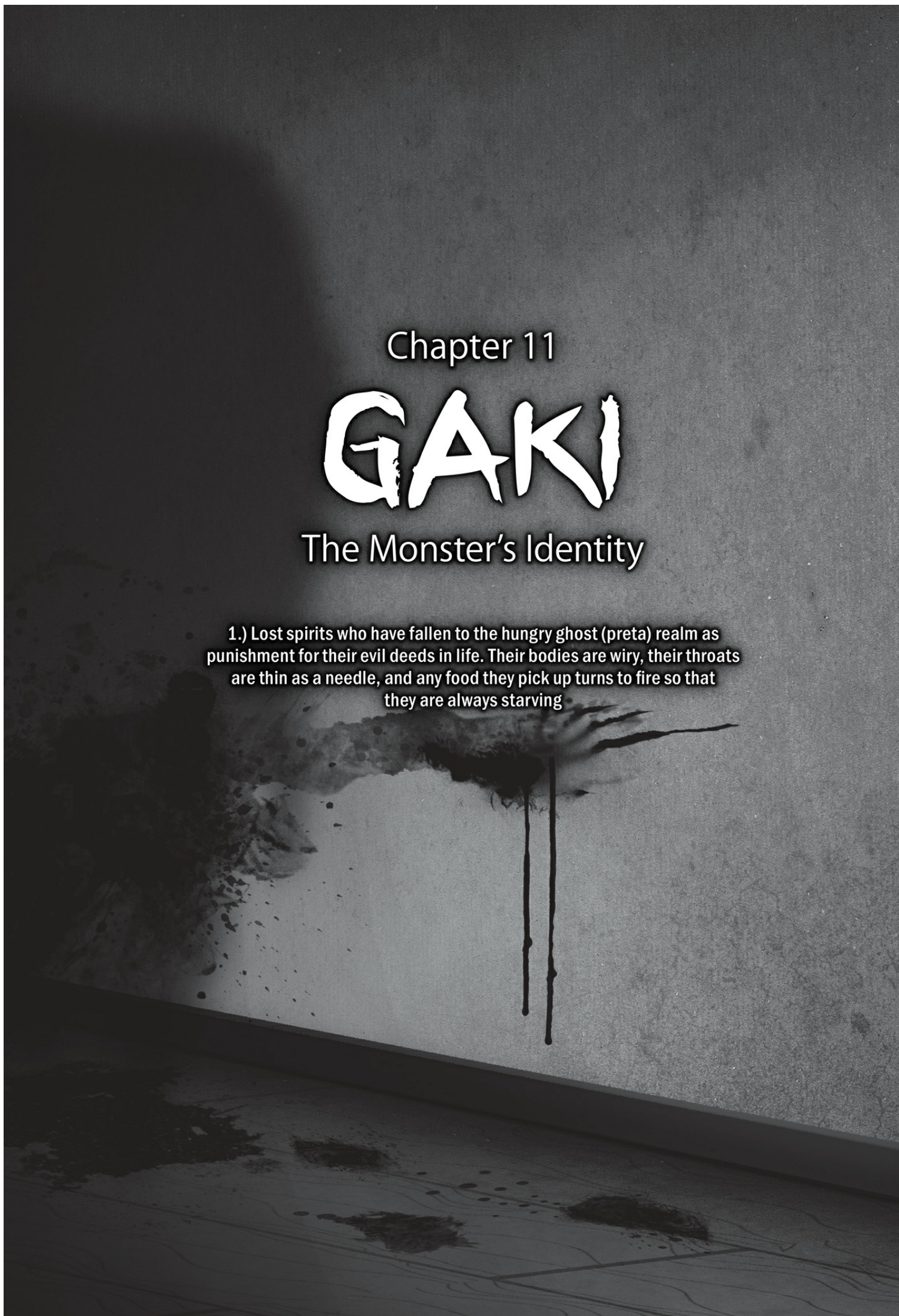
Shun said his prayers and closed his eyes. Just then, he heard a heavy, low sound from far away like someone had kicked a wall.

Chapter 11

GAKI

The Monster's Identity

1.) Lost spirits who have fallen to the hungry ghost (preta) realm as punishment for their evil deeds in life. Their bodies are wiry, their throats are thin as a needle, and any food they pick up turns to fire so that they are always starving



1

I'm hungry...

Mika sighed for what seemed like the thousandth time since coming to the mansion as she listlessly watched Takuro angrily trying to work his cellphone in the entrance hall. Sitting on the staircase, she looked up at the chandelier overhead. Her cheek still stung where Takuro had hit her. At first she was overcome with anger and resentment like nothing she'd ever felt before after being unjustly hit, but that slowly decayed into hysteria and panic. She'd broken down and cried in the foyer for a while, but even that took its toll on her. She soon tired out and simply sat there quietly.

"Damn it! Why isn't it working?"

Takuro kicked the door. He'd also been running hot for a while now, but unlike Mika, his battery still had a full charge. He'd been trying to contact someone in his cellphone's address book, but even though his signal seemed to be good, he hadn't managed to connect to anyone.

"Try all you like. It's useless. Naoki's blocking it," Mika muttered. "We're going to die here at the hands of Naoki's ghost. Chopped up like Takeshi..."

She recalled being chased by the blue monster. But unlike when she was trembling and cowering in the second-floor bathroom, she felt almost no fear now. It felt like she'd cried it all out.

"Stop it. That's stupid," Takuro barked. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

"Then who killed Takeshi? Do you think a normal human is capable of such a brutal murder? Obviously Naoki did it. I'm telling you that blueberry-colored giant is Naoki."

"Calm down, Mika. This giant of yours doesn't even exist!" he ranted, spit flying in all directions.

I'm not the one who's lost my composure. You're the one that needs to calm down, Takuro.

"Are you saying I'm lying?"

“No, I’m not saying that. But maybe you mistook what you saw. You can be surprisingly rash.”

“That’s not true. It wasn’t just me, either. Hiroshi saw the monster too.”

“Yes, I did see it with my own eyes.”

A reassuring voice came from the second floor. Mika turned around and saw Hiroshi walking down the stairs, wiping his hands with a handkerchief. Red stains dotted it.

“Is that... Takeshi’s blood?” she asked, pointing at the handkerchief.

“Yes, it is,” he responded with a look of dead calm.

A fear seized Mika that was different from what she felt around Takuro.

“You’re saying you saw Naoki’s ghost too?” Takuro asked, leaning brazenly against the front door.

“His ghost? It was nothing of the sort. Spirits, souls, and the like are all purely fictitious. They do not exist in reality,” Hiroshi answered flatly as he passed by Mika.

“See? No way is something like that real.” Takuro gave a satisfied nod and looked down his nose at Mika. “The class brain has spoken. We can all rest assured now.”

Normally Mika would have snapped at him for trying to belittle her, but strangely, she wasn’t angry. It seemed fear wasn’t the only emotion she’d cried away.

“If it’s not a ghost, then what did we see? Can you explain that?” she asked in a calm, even voice.

“It was most likely an illusion,” Hiroshi answered instantly.

“An illusion? What the hell? A ghost would be more believable, don’t you think?”

“Mika, you mentioned you were bitten by a blue grasshopper before coming inside this mansion, no?” Hiroshi asked her flatly.

“Huh? Yeah, I did.”

Mika nodded, looking at her right hand. The swelling had gone down, but there was still a small mark where she'd been bitten.

"I was actually bitten by the same species of insect," Hiroshi said, lifting up his soft bangs to reveal a small mark on his brow just like the one on Mika's hand. "I cannot say for certain whether that grasshopper was a sudden mutation or simply an unknown species without further investigation, but what if its body contained some sort of venom? Perhaps it injected us with it and that's why we were seeing things."

"You're saying we were just hallucinating?" Mika shook her head adamantly. "And we saw the same thing? That's just not possible."

"Psychologically speaking, when people are together in the same environment and exposed to the same stressors, they can experience extremely similar visions. Many accounts of ghosts and demons can be explained by exactly this sort of shared hallucination."

"Then what about Takeshi? Illusions and hallucinations don't kill people."

"Wasn't he also injected with the same venom? It's not uncommon for drug addicts to be so affected by their hallucination that they end up harming themselves."

"You're trying to say he chopped off his own limbs and head? Isn't that exactly what you would call 'unscientific'? No way that happened."

Mika laughed even though it wasn't funny in the least. In fact, tears were spilling from the corners of her eyes. It was like she had no control over what she was feeling. Some circuit inside of her must have gone haywire.

"What if the venom caused him to become insensitive to pain? With something like a chainsaw or guillotine, it's conceivable that he chopped his own head off."

"A chainsaw? Guillotine? Are you okay in the head? Maybe the venom's gotten to *you*. There's nothing of the sort in here."

"There's no guarantee that Takeshi killed himself in that second-floor room. Perhaps he died somewhere else in the mansion and was carried there by the rats." Hiroshi answered her without hesitation, though his rationalizing seemed

to grow more and more strained.

So it was suicide? Does he really believe that? At least it doesn't seem like he's hiding anything.

Mika scrutinized Hiroshi's face to try and decipher his intentions.

"What?" Hiroshi looked at her. But his eyes, ever cool and calm, said nothing.

They're just like mommy and daddy's eyes.

A dark, rotten feeling bubbled up deep inside her.

"Mika dear, how was the sports festival? Are you keeping up with your studies? What do you want for your birthday?"

"Mika, did you grow again? That kitty really likes you, doesn't it? What do you want as a souvenir from my business trip to Sapporo?"

It wasn't that she never talked to her parents. But they always had this cagey attitude about them. Now she understood that that dull, avoidant look in their eyes was because they were never really looking at her at all. They were staring into nothing.

"Mommy, I told you before that I got first place in my grade for the foot race, and how my test scores improved on the final exam, didn't I? Were you only pretending to listen? Does what I say just go in one ear and out the other? And daddy, whenever our conversations go sour, you always change the subject to my height. And would you stop calling her 'kitty'? Do you even know her name? The reason Heart only likes me is because you guys completely ignore her. I don't need a birthday present. I don't need a souvenir. I'd be satisfied just actually getting to spend some time with you two. Why don't you understand that?"

"Oh, hey, this looks like it'll come off," Takuro exclaimed.

His voice snapped Mika out of her thoughts. He was currently fighting with a wooden plank nailed over one of the windows, desperately trying to rip it off.

"If I could shove something thin between this and the wall, that might give me enough leverage to pop it off. Oh, I know. I've got the perfect thing."

He took the knife from his pocket and inserted the blade between the board

and the wall, but the tip snapped instantly.

“Damn it all!”

Throwing the broken knife to the ground, he started yelling at Mika and Hiroshi.

“You guys got any bright ideas? If you’ve got time to sit there spacing out, then go look for something that might help!”

And whose fault is it we’re in this situation in the first place?

Normally Mika would have thrown in a snide comment, but the urge never came. It would just start another pointless argument.

“Okay, I’ll go look,” she said lifelessly as she got up and proceeded east down the hall.

Mika entered the open door at the end of the hallway. There was a dining table that could easily seat ten, and a shelf filled with dishes. It was clearly the dining room. Behind the counter on the left wall was a fancy kitchen.

Opening the door beside the counter, she proceeded into the kitchen. She investigated the first shelf she laid eyes on and discovered all kinds of knives, all laid out methodically. They were all well cared for and certainly didn’t look like they’d been sitting there for twenty years. Mika picked up the cleaver to the far left. She stared at the sharp, pointed tip with fascination.

What would happen if I put this through my throat?

A dangerous thought crossed her mind. Without doubt, she’d tasted fear and suffering over the last couple of hours unlike anything she’d ever experienced before. But it wouldn’t last forever. Now that Takeshi was dead, he didn’t need to fear that monster anymore. If she took her own life right now, she’d never have to feel that way ever again either. It wasn’t a bad option, in her opinion.

Even if they did manage to escape, only her cat Heart would be waiting for her at home. And even at home, whenever she went to bed at night, it always felt like there was a deep, dark, bottomless loneliness crushing her. If that was all she had to look forward to, then she might as well...

She gripped the knife tightly, and then... The door to the north that connected

to the back hall burst open. A giant blue head poked into the room.

“Nooooooooo!” A shrill scream instantly escaped her lips. “Ahhhhh!”

She couldn’t stop screaming even if she wanted to. The blue monster tried to push its way into the kitchen, not seeming to care at all about the noise. It contorted itself in strange ways in an attempt to slip through the door.

Between her screams, Mika could hear the smacking sound of something sticky being chewed. The monster appeared to be eating something. Whatever it was, it was quite hard. The right half of the monster’s face was distorted as it chomped down on it with all its might. Its ugly, puffy lips lifted up, revealing sharp fangs. They were all bent inward, resembling a Venus flytrap. The same gruesome smacking noise continued as it opened and closed its mouth, part of its grisly meal hanging out from between two teeth.

“Aaahhhhhhhh!”

Mika simply continued to scream. It was a human arm dangling from the monster’s mouth. The fingers hung lifelessly, swaying ever so slightly as the monster gnawed on the upper arm.

“Ahhh! Ahhhh! Ahhhhhhhh—”

Her voice cracked and the taste of iron spread through her mouth. The monster slurped the rest of the arm into its mouth like a wet noodle and chomped it down with a low growl. Mika could hear bones splintering and muscles being torn apart. She watched in horror as the monster swallowed the rest of what used to be someone’s arm in one gulp and then let out a satisfied burp. It licked the blood splattered on its lips with its long, blue tongue, then sluggishly scanned its surroundings. The moment its giant eyes locked on to Mika, it froze.

No...

Her screaming was finally silenced.

I said no!

Mika gripped the cleaver with both hands and pointed it at the monster.

Stay away!

She meant to say that with all her might, but her throat was so ravaged from screaming that barely any sound came out at all. She felt like something was stuck in her throat, but blood was all that came out when she coughed. The only thing she could think about was what the monster had just swallowed. She was fine with dying, but she couldn't stand the thought of being eaten by that thing.

The giant tilted its head slightly as it slowly drew closer to Mika. Its muscles bulged with each step it took. Even with a knife, there was no way she could fight a monster like that. Instead, she turned on her heels and fled. With one leaping stride after another, she ran into the dining room. She glanced behind her, but the monster seemed to be struggling to fit through the dining room door.

It's okay. I can escape.

Feeling a flash of hope and confidence, Mika nodded and clenched her fists. She streaked past the dining table and opened the door to the hall.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

Takuro and Hiroshi were standing just outside the room. They must have heard her screams and come running.

"Run! That thing's chasing me!" she shouted hoarsely, then took off down the hall as fast as her legs would take her.

"Whoa! Hey, what the hell is that?!" Takuro shouted shrilly from behind her. Not even he could deny it now.

When Mika was halfway up the stairs, her stomach let out an almost comical growl. It didn't seem to care in the slightest that she was in mortal danger. She couldn't help but crack a wry smile.

I really am hungry...

As she kept running, she thought about what she would have for dinner.

I wanna go to a family restaurant tonight. I'll eat until my stomach bursts. Salisbury steak, spaghetti, pizza, fried rice, potato salad... Maybe not bone-in chicken, though.

2

Shun walked down the third-floor hall shakily as if he was in a dream. He still hadn't fully recovered from the unspeakable scare he'd experienced in the wardrobe. If that sound hadn't come from downstairs at the exact moment it did, he would have ended up killed and eaten just like Anna.

But he felt no joy in surviving. There was no telling where that monster would come from next, and his will and ability to escape were gone. Everything in the world was decided the moment the universe came into being—a novel Shun had read once said something along those lines. If his fate was to be chased and killed by that monster, then there was no point in fighting back. He should just accept it willingly.

But it wasn't exactly nihilism that had overcome Shun. It was nothing that extreme. It was almost the opposite. A nothingness. So much had happened that his emotional circuits were fried. It was quite similar to the bleak, subhuman way he felt while Takuro was bullying him.

What was that monster?

Gazing at each of the Greek letters on the doors, he wandered down the hall in a daze.

It was two meters tall with blue skin. Its muscles were abnormally developed. A large, unbalanced head sat atop the blue mass, complete with bulging, piercing eyes that took up half its face. It had humanoid features, but nothing about it was human.

Just a few moments earlier, Shun had been convinced that either Takuro or Hiroshi had dressed up as the monster to scare him. But after actually encountering the monster face-to-face, his carefully built rationalization came crashing down with a magnificent boom. The lifelike texture of its skin and the nuanced changes in its expression weren't replicable by a costume or mask. Perhaps a talented makeup artist or a professor of robotics could create a realistic monster on that level, but it was unlikely anyone like that would go through the trouble just to scare some kids out in the country.

Which means...

Shun formed a new theory about the monster's true identity. But if he said it out loud, everyone would surely laugh. He could practically hear them mocking him and calling him crazy now, but he had no other explanation. It was all he could think of.

Is this reality? Or just some absurd illusion?

In order to find out, Shun walked to the room with a placard marked "σ." In Shun's game, you could use the key found in the child's room to open the door to the study on the same floor. The bookshelf there hid a door that led to the attic.

He inserted the key with the same Greek letter as the door into the lock. Twisting left, it clicked open. Shun licked his dry lips, then slowly turned the knob. The room looked peaceful. In the middle of it sat a low desk, and against the wall was an antique-looking bookshelf.

"So there really is a bookshelf here too..." he muttered as he walked into the room, casually touching a paperweight on the desk.

A world just like his game surrounded him. The appearance of the mansion, the placement of the rooms, their layouts... It was all the same. Even the monster that attacked them. Its blue skin, giant head with swollen eyes, hulking muscles, and its taste for human flesh... It was exactly the monster from his game. And something like that shouldn't exist in real life. The mansion might be one thing, but the monster was another story. Shun was finally sure.

This is the game I made. We've gotten sucked into the game world.

But even having figured that out, he still needed to figure out what to do next. Putting a hand to his chin, he racked his brain for a way to return to reality.

"Over here! This door's open!" Mika shouted from the hall.

Not a moment later, she appeared in the doorway. Shun was shocked to see her tightly gripping a cleaver. But she didn't even slow down. She ran right into him as she barreled into the room. Mika fell backwards as Shun's elbow collided with the desk. The impact caused him to drop the key he was holding.

Takuro and Hiroshi weren't far behind Mika either. Once they were both in, Takuro slammed the door shut.

"Hey! It's coming! Help me brace this, you guys!"

Shun's body almost reflexively responded to Takuro barking orders. He still wasn't sure what was going on, but he didn't question it. He immediately took to pressing against the door with Hiroshi.

Bam.

A low, heavy sound echoed from out in the hall and shook the whole room as the door bowed inward. The giant's strength was incredible. Even pushing with all their might, they wouldn't hold it off for long. Three boys were no match for a monster.

"Hey, you think this might do something?"

Mika picked up the key to the room that Shun had dropped and slipped it into the keyhole in the door. Hearing the lock click, they all backed away from the door. A horrifying howl that sounded like it was echoing up from the depths of hell assaulted their ears as the monster banged on the door. They could hear a terrible creaking sound with each hit. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before the monster forced its way in.

"Let's bring the desk over here and barricade the door."

At Hiroshi's suggestion, the four of them picked up the desk and pushed it right up against the door. It was a heavy, sturdy piece of furniture. With it in place, even if the lock did break, the door should stay shut.

Shun and the others backed as far away from the door as they could and huddled together, waiting to see what would happen. The creature continued to pound on the door, and the walls of the room shook violently with each blow. It seemed to go on forever, but at last, it finally seemed to relent and the hallway grew quiet.

Hiroshi stepped forward and hopped up on the desk to put his ear to the door. His courage was impressive. There was no way Shun could have done the same even if he knew for sure the monster was gone.

“I don’t hear anything. I think it’s given up.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Mika slumped to the floor like the nerves had been all that was keeping her upright.

“Hey, Mika. Do something about that, would you? It’s dangerous.”

Mika looked down at her own hands. She was still holding the knife.

“Oh... Sorry.”

She placed it on the ground, then put a hand to her chest and took a few deep breaths.

“We’re safe in here, right? It looks like it can’t get in.”

“Most likely. If it had the key, I suspect it would have used it and forced its way in. The door is more solid than I expected though. For the moment, we seem to be fine,” Hiroshi answered, peering at the keyhole.

“Hey. What the hell was that monster?” Takuro asked, pacing the room anxiously. “I wasn’t bit by any grasshopper. But I saw that thing too. That means it’s not a hallucination, right?”

“It still may be a sudden mutation, just like the grasshopper and the rats.”

“What animal would turn into *that* after a sudden mutation?”

“I don’t have enough data to answer you. It most closely resembles a gorilla or human.”

“A human? You’re saying that monster’s human?”

Listening to their bickering in one ear, Shun tried to recall the backstory for his game that wasn’t explained in-game. Twenty years ago, the biologist who lived in this mansion was performing genetic treatments on his sick daughter to try and cure her. They were a success and she made a shocking recovery. But their happiness didn’t last for long. The genetic manipulation had unintended consequences. An unexpected linkage caused her to continue to grow and get stronger until she eventually turned into a blue-skinned monster.

But if Shun told them that, they’d think he was crazy. He wasn’t even sure it was really the truth himself, so he kept quiet as he sat in the corner of the

room.

“I’m telling you, that was Naoki!” Mika muttered, still hugging her knees. “Our parents are probably worried about us by now since we haven’t come home yet. If we can just hold out a little longer, I’m sure help will come. So when we get out of here, Takuro, you have to tell the police the truth about why Naoki jumped in front of that truck. Then Naoki will be able to pass on.”

“What, it’s all my fault now?”

The look in Takuro’s eyes changed. Shun tensed, expecting another fight.

“Maybe... You might be right.”

But the last thing Shun expected to hear came out of Takuro’s mouth.

“Everyone’s gotten involved in all this craziness because of me. Sorry.”

Takuro bowed. Mika’s expression, which had been as stiff as a statue until now, softened.

“Takuro...”

“After seeing what happened to Takeshi and being chased by that monster... I finally understand. Naoki and the new kid both probably saw me like that monster. They must have been so scared. They did everything I said to the letter. Naoki even ran in front of that truck. And the new kid...”

Shun covered his ears. He didn’t want to remember it.

“Mika, you’re right. I basically killed him. I don’t want to repeat the same mistake again. I swear to god. Thanks for helping me realize that.”

Takuro placed a hand on Mika’s shoulder, a refreshing smile on his face.

“I’m so glad... Takuro, I love you.” Tears fell from her eyes. “Hey, Takuro. You know how you talked about living on your own in high school? Can I come visit you? I’m actually really good at cooking, cleaning, and laundry. I swear I won’t be a burden.”

“Of course. Why don’t you live with me then?” Takuro asked, stroking Mika’s hair and drawing closer to her.

“Really? I’d love to!” Mika proclaimed joyously as she hugged him. “I’ve been

so lonely every night, but now I won't be alone..."

"No, you won't. Naoki and Takeshi are waiting for you." There was a crazed glint in Takuro's eyes.

"Huh?" Mika's smile froze.

Takuro then pushed Mika away from him, and both Shun and Hiroshi could see the cleaver in his hand. The tip of it was wet with bright red blood.

"Takuro... why?" she groaned, holding her side. Blood seeped from between her fingers.

"Are you an idiot? I'm not gonna give myself up just 'cause a couple nobodies died. I have to succeed my father and make the company even greater."

"You really are an irredeemable fool..."

Mika's hazy, unfocused eyes appeared to be on Takuro as she collapsed to her knees and slumped backward.

"Mika, are you okay?"

Shun rushed to her side as she lay face-up on the floor. She was pressing her palm over where Takuro had stabbed her, but the blood just kept coming and wouldn't stop. She moaned in pain as she spasmed like a fish on land.

"Are you insane?" Hiroshi asked pointedly, flashing a rare glimpse of emotion as he glared at Takuro.

"Sorry, but everyone here needs to die. That way no one will find out about Naoki."

"The police aren't stupid. You'll be caught soon enough."

"I can just blame it all on that monster. I'll tell them it ate you guys. They'll never suspect me!"

Takuro now turned the knife on Hiroshi, but Hiroshi only scoffed.

"Better yet, if I throw your bodies in the hall, that monster might just eat you right up. And if they never find your bodies, it'll just be a missing persons case and not a murder. They won't investigate too hard."

"You are indeed crazy. It's a waste of time to continue talking to you."

Hiroshi took off his school uniform jacket, shredded the dress shirt he was wearing underneath it, and approached Mika who was now lying in a pool of her own blood.

“What should we do, Hiroshi? Mika’s stopped moving,” Shun cried pathetically, not sure what to do next.

“This is bad. Her pulse is rapid.” Hiroshi held Mika’s wrist and frowned. “Let’s stop the bleeding for now.”

“Hey! Who said you could move?” Takuro shouted. “There’s no point in doing that. You can’t save her now.”

Takuro was standing across the room up against the bookshelf. He tauntingly waved the blade and smiled like a madman.

“You’re all going to be monster food.”

He raised the cleaver in his right hand just as the bookshelf behind him began to slide to the right.

“Oh!” Shun exclaimed.

Behind the bookshelf was the secret entrance to the hidden attic room, and it was the blue monster that now stood in the open doorway.

“Takuro, behind you!”

Hiroshi tried to warn him, but Takuro just continued to sneer.

“As if I’d fall for something so childish—” Those were Takuro’s last words.

The monster’s mouth opened wide, splitting its massive face from ear to ear. Sticky, green liquid dripped from its lips, falling onto Takuro’s head. But before he could turn around, the monster sunk its fangs into him. It was over in less than a second.

Takuro, now headless, toppled to the floor. Blood sprayed out from his body, dying the study’s floor, walls, and ceiling red. Shun could only stand there, mouth agape, and watch as the hellish scene unfolded.

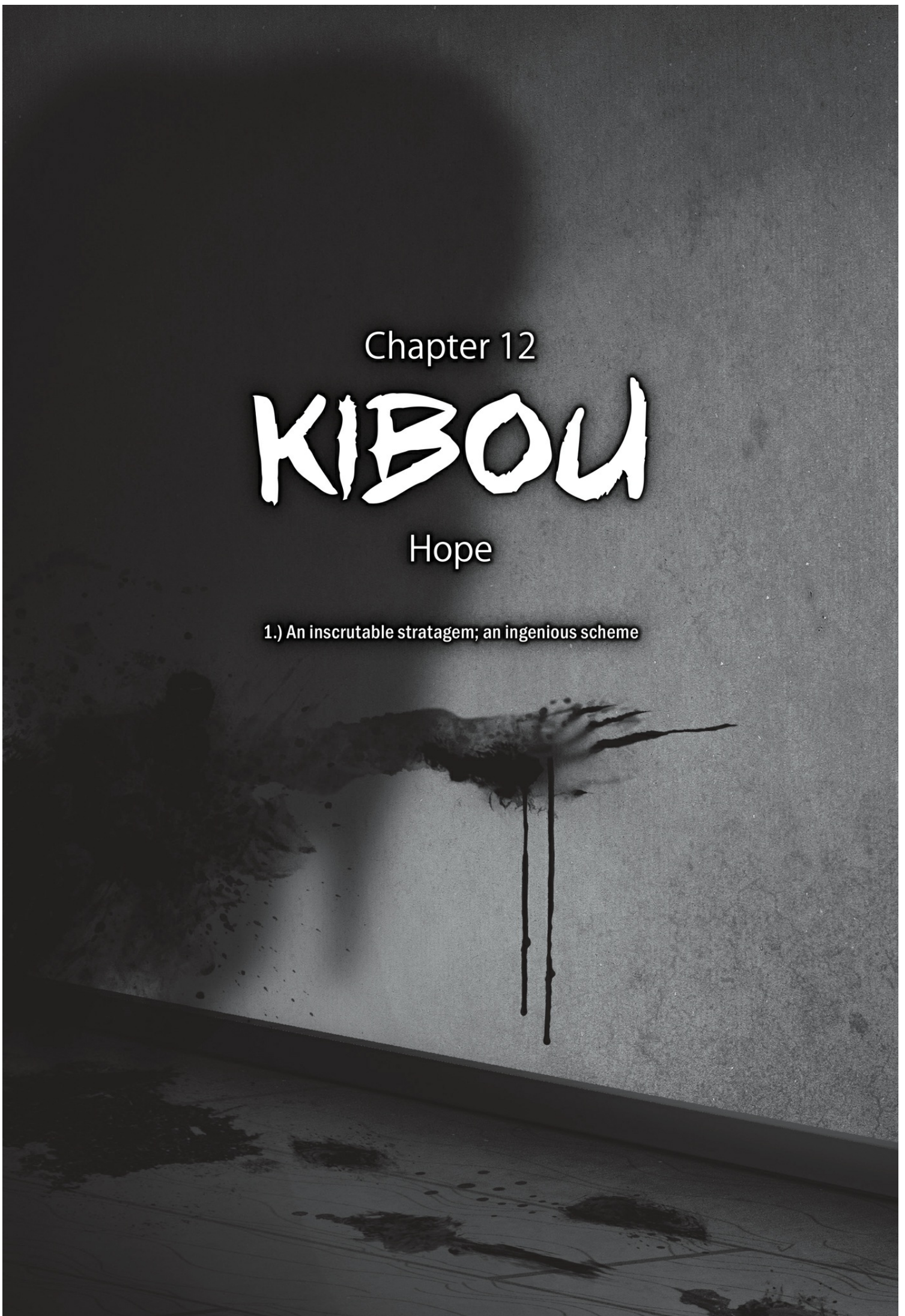


Chapter 12

KIBOU

Hope

1.) An inscrutable stratagem; an ingenious scheme



1

“Let’s run.”

Hiroshi’s words snapped Shun back to reality. When he turned around, he saw Hiroshi already trying to push the desk out from in front of the door.

That’s right. We can’t give up yet.

Shun stood next to Hiroshi and pushed against the desk with all his might. Once they cleared a gap wide enough for a person to slip through, Hiroshi quickly picked Mika up off the floor and put her on his back. While he was doing that, Shun unlocked the door. The monster was still busy chewing on Takuro’s head and didn’t seem to notice them making a move.

It’s okay. We can escape.

Shun opened the door, let Hiroshi and Mika through, and then exited into the hall himself. He turned around and looked at Takuro. How many times had he wished for him to disappear from this world? But now that his wish had come true, he didn’t feel happy in the slightest. Instead, guilt surged over him like a wave. He closed the door and chased after Hiroshi with Mika on his back.

“How could you do that?”

Anna’s words resurfaced in his mind. She hadn’t been wrong. Shun had given birth to that monster. He’d killed Takuro in his game to vent his daily frustrations. He was no different than Takuro who committed heinous acts of violence under the guise of “experiments.” No, he was worse. His monster had also killed poor Anna who had been nothing but kind to him.

By the time they reached the top of the stairs, the door to the study burst open and the monster stepped forth. It was chewing on Takuro’s arm as if it were a piece of fried chicken. Shun cursed himself for not locking the door behind him, but it was spilt milk now.

The monster turned to them and, licking its lips, began to move. It was still hungry. Though it appeared to be a leisurely gait, it gave chase at frightening speed.

What do we do?

Shun desperately tried to think things through. If this was the game world he'd created, they should find the exit if they just played things out. There was no time to hesitate.

"Hiroshi, this way!"

Shun put his left hand on Mika's waist, pulled on Hiroshi's arm with his right, and rushed down the stairs with them as fast as he could. They were moving at top speed, but the monster was slowly closing in. Hiroshi and Shun could have moved faster if they ditched Mika, but that wasn't an option. Shun couldn't let there be another victim.

Upon reaching the first floor, Shun guided the others past the headless suit of armor and into the Japanese-style room. The monster looked around, shook its shoulders wildly, and then slunk after them. It seemed like it could catch up to them at any time, but it wasn't really trying for some reason. It was as if it was enjoying this game of hide and seek.

"...Is the basement through here?" Hiroshi, who had been silent until now, said in a low voice as they stepped onto the tatami mats. He must have realized it as well.

"That's right. We're in my game. I don't know how this happened, but if we follow the game's route..."

They crossed the room and opened the sliding door on the far wall to reveal the dreary stairway to the basement. The chill air stroked Shun's skin, but he didn't flinch. He simply proceeded down the stairs.

The basement was pitch dark and he couldn't see anything, but Shun already knew exactly where the light switch would be. After descending the stairs, he felt along the right wall until his fingertips touched the slide-style switch. He flipped it.

Hiroshi's shadow wobbled from side to side in the light of the naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. Broken furniture, appliances, and other garbage littered the place. Next to an old tube television were the cardboard boxes Takuro had brought in, unceremoniously dumped there.

“Now this way.”

Slipping narrowly between things in the cluttered room, they proceeded further into the basement. Following Shun’s lead, they were quickly putting distance between them and the monster. Here, their small size gave them a huge advantage. The giant monster would have to clear a way through the room before it could come after them.

Upon reaching the far back of the basement, they discovered an area about the size of a small room enclosed by iron bars, just as Shun had predicted. The underground cell. This was where, in Shun’s game, the girl who became the monster was confined. Blackish-red stains still clung to the concrete walls. The words “HELP ME” had also been repeatedly scratched into the walls with someone’s fingernails.

But most importantly, there was something glimmering in the corner of the cell. It was a new key marked with “φ,” the Greek letter phi. If things continued to follow the game, it would get them into the parlor on the second floor.

“Let’s hurry.”

Pulling on Hiroshi’s hand, Shun stepped with him into the cell. Before picking up the key, he closed the cell and bolted the cell door. If he didn’t follow the game to the letter, it would be game over. Hiroshi spread his uniform jacket out on the cold floor and gently laid Mika on top of it. A considerable amount of blood was seeping through the shirt he’d used as an emergency bandage from all the running around.

“...Where are we?” Mika asked weakly, looking around.

“Shh... You shouldn’t talk right now,” Hiroshi said, putting his pointer finger to his lips.

“What happened... to Takuro?”

“We can talk when we escape from this mansion—”

“Please tell me. Where is Takuro?” Mika stretched her arm out with a pained sigh.

“...He was attacked and killed by the monster,” Hiroshi answered flatly.

“So... he’s dead...”

Was she relieved or grieving? Her expression was a difficult one, as if she herself couldn’t decide. Most likely even she didn’t know her true feelings.

“I’m a fool. I believed him, even if it was just for a second. I know his true nature better than anyone—”

She was cut off by a bestial howl coming from elsewhere in the room. It was enough to make all three of them shudder. A tower of plastic cases stacked atop each other toppled over as the monster smashed them out of its way. It had finally caught up to them. It approached, grabbed the bars with both hands, and leaned its face in. The bars kept it outside, but it was only a single meter away from them. It was so close that they could feel its rapid breathing.

Frustrated that its prey was so close yet so far, the monster bared its fangs and let out a low growl. A pungent smell escaped its mouth. There was no disguising the stench of human flesh. Shun nearly barfed. The monster opened its huge eyes even wider in anger and began shaking the iron bars. Shun, Mika, and Hiroshi stood shoulder to shoulder with Mika in the middle. They all thought they were going to die. The monster was so strong that the iron bars were visibly warping as it yanked on them.

“This is bad,” Hiroshi said with a furrowed brow.

He was right. It was only a matter of time before the bars broke. At this rate, they’d all end up monster food.

“I’m sorry. This is my fault.” Shun hung his head and bit his lip. “I’m the one who brought us down here...”

Shun cursed himself for being so foolish. In the game, you only had to hide here for a while before the monster would give up and withdraw. But now it was clear not everything worked the same way it did in the game. Thinking back on it, there were a few other discrepancies too. Maybe someone had secretly altered the game behind Shun’s back.

The iron bar in the monster’s left hand weakened and started to twist like a piece of rubber. Now it was all over. Shun closed his eyes and said his prayers.

“I’ll distract it,” Mika suddenly said. “While I’m doing that, you run.”

“I don’t follow,” Hiroshi said with a frown.

Shun felt the same way.

“This might surprise you, but I was on the track team in my first year of middle school. I’m pretty confident in these legs.” Slapping her thighs, Mika slowly stood up. “And I’m small, so I can easily slip back out through all that clutter.”

“Do you understand what you’re saying? You’re injured.”

“I’m fine now. I barely feel the pain.”

“It’s just a surge of adrenaline that’s making you feel that way.”

“This is nothing. In fact, I’d say it’s a perfect handicap. It’d be boring if I just ran circles around that monster, right?”

She was clearly putting on a brave front. Her right cheek was spasming as she forced a smile and her knees were knocking together as her legs trembled.

The iron bars bent even more. Licking its lips, the monster began pushing its head through the gap.

“There’s no time to hesitate. See you later!” Mika said with a wave of her hand and bright smile.

“Please reconsider. Mika!”

Brushing off his attempt to stop her, she quickly slid open the cell door and bolted.



2

“Over here, monster! Follow me!” Mika shouted, waving her arms.

The monster opened its left eye freakishly wide and slowly turned its giant face toward Mika. It let out a low growl that would serve as the starter pistol for their footrace. Mika kicked off the concrete floor and dashed off. She heard Hiroshi calling from inside the cell trying to stop her, but she had other things to focus on.

Avoiding the mountains of junk, Mika made her way through the basement storeroom. She snuck a peek behind her. The monster was chasing her, just as planned.

It felt good to run all out again. A smile crept onto her face. The pain in her abdomen didn't even bother her anymore as she fondly recalled her second grade sports festival. That was where she'd won her first race.

“Good job! You’re amazing, Mika!”

Her dad had jumped for joy cheering for her, not caring one bit about who was staring.

“Congratulations. You worked really hard.”

Mika could still remember her mother's warmth as she hugged her tight.

That pleasure of running around the track faster than everyone else. It was a strange sensation. Almost like she'd become the wind itself. And then there were the smiles on her parents' faces. Those were the reasons she'd become so enraptured by track and field.

But things went awry after she quit running because she couldn't get the times she wanted. To make things worse, her parents started treating her like one would a swollen sore. In turn, she became irritated with them and turned defiant.

Why didn't I see it?

Mika bit her lip as she ran.

Mommy and daddy didn't stop loving me. I just started ignoring their love.

Mika realized the truth, but it was too late. When she was being so rebellious, how were her parents supposed to know how to interact with her?

I wonder how they would react if I said I wanted to run again. I've got my high school entrance exams this year. Would they fuss at me and tell me not to do something so stupid? Or would they encourage me and tell me to do my best? It doesn't matter which. If they support me, I'll do my best to meet their expectations. And if they disagree, I'll just talk to them about it until they come around. I know they'll understand.

Mika sprinted up the stairs two at a time. Despite her injury, her body felt light. It was as if wings had sprouted from her back.

I have to get home quickly. Mommy and daddy must be worried.

Wiping the sweat forming on her brow, Mika continued to run and run.

This feels good. It's like I'm flying. But... Man, I'm hungry. I miss mommy's curry. I wish I had some right now. Would she make it for me if I asked? Jeez, I thought I'd reach the top of the stairs by now... Just how long is this staircase?

3

Shun and Hiroshi quickly chased after Mika, and subsequently the monster. But they were both too fast and soon out of sight. Furthermore, the walls of trash the monster knocked over in its wake obstructed their path forward. When they finally reached the Japanese-style room, it had already been a few minutes since they'd last seen Mika.

"Mika! Where are you?!"

No one responded.

Flecks of blood stained the tatami mats. They were wet and sticky to the touch—still fresh. Most likely they were from the wound in Mika's abdomen. Following the trail of blood, Hiroshi and Shun cut through the room. They followed it into the hall and to the staircase. At the foot of it was more blood.

"This is bad."

Hiroshi grimaced and looked to the second floor. The carpet covering the staircase was already red, making it hard to follow the trail of fresh blood much further. But from here, there was only one way she could have gone: upstairs.

Shun followed Hiroshi as he climbed the stairs. There was no obvious blood in the second-floor hallway. Had she run to the third floor? Hiroshi seemed to think the same thing, and they walked over to the next flight of stairs together.

Whud.

They then heard a low thud, like something heavy dropping to the floor. It made the floorboards underneath them shake.

Whud. Whud.

The noise continued, and with each thud came the rattling of the floor.

Whud. Whud. Whud.

As they made their way up the stairs, the noise got louder and the shaking got stronger.

"...What is that?"

Intense unease clouded in Shun's heart. Something bad was awaiting them. It was all he could do steady his rapid breathing.

Whud. Whud. Whud. Whud.

Upon reaching the third floor, Hiroshi froze.

"What's the matter?" Shun asked.

Following Hiroshi's gaze, Shun gulped. Bright red blood stained the hall. But unlike the spot in the entrance hall, here there was one long, thick trail. It was easy to imagine the monster grabbing Mika by the collar and dragging her along. The trail went down the hall opposite of the study where Takuro had been killed.

Whud. Whud. Whud. Whud. Whud.

The creepy sounds were coming from the same direction.

"...Mika?" Shun called sheepishly down the hall.

The noise could just be her stuck in a room, banging on the door trying to get out. If that was the case, they had to go help her. Hiroshi had been walking in front so far, but now Shun took the lead. If he'd just acted more promptly before, he might have been able to save Anna too.

I don't want anyone else to die. I don't want to regret any more.

The line of Mika's blood ended in front of the door marked with "τ" or tau. Shun put one ear to the door and listened closely.

Whud!

He could hear the same noise but even louder now. Mika had to be in there. He tried the door. It wasn't locked.

Whud!

"Mika—"

He opened the door and burst in only to be silenced by a horrible sight. The blue monster was facing away from him and doing jumping squats. It landed with a dull thud every time, shaking the whole room. There was a bright red rug at the monster's feet. When it hit the ground, sticky liquid splashed up. No, it

wasn't a carpet. Upon closer inspection, it resembled a human figure.

Whud!

Little bits of flesh flew about as the monster stomped down. The blackish-red skin as thin as stretched leather was no longer identifiable. Shun could only guess that it might have been Mika from the long, brown hair trailing from the otherwise indiscernible figure. Shun closed the door slowly so as not to alert the monster, then distanced himself from the room.

I couldn't save her either.

Shun ground his teeth hard. He was starting to hate himself for being so powerless. But there was no time to be depressed. He could beat himself up after they escaped.

"Hiroshi," Shun called.

But Hiroshi just stared blankly at the closed door, as if seeing Mika's remains had traumatized him.

"Hey, Hiroshi!"

Hiroshi still didn't respond, so Shun shook his shoulder roughly.

"...What is going on here? This is no longer anything I can explain with science. Is it a bad dream? Am I merely having a nightmare?" Hiroshi asked, still staring at the door.

Certainly, science couldn't explain it. But surely Hiroshi had realized it by now. They might as well be inside Shun's game.

"I don't know why this is happening either. But if this really is just like the game, then all we need to do is keep going in order to escape." Shun tried to explain, but Hiroshi just continued to shake his head in denial. "The key we found in the underground cell should open the parlor—"

Shun stopped when he realized he'd left the key in the basement.

"Sorry. I'll go get it right now, so will you wait for me on the second floor? Please be careful of the monster."

Shun hurried back down to the first floor, crossed the Japanese-style room,

and entered the basement again. Grabbing the key and Hiroshi's jacket that were lying on the cold floor of the cell, he then turned to head back. As he was leaving, he spotted the cardboard boxes Takuro had brought in out of the corner of his eye. What was in there?

Shun stopped and peered inside the top-most box. It was full of stuffed household trash bags. The black plastic kind that were a rare sight nowadays. Shun touched one. It seemed to be holding something soft. Shun opened the bag and a foul smell came out. He peered inside it.

"...!"

A voiceless scream escaped him. It was such a shock that he felt like he might faint.

"Wh-What is... this?"

Inside the bag was a chopped-up human body. But that wasn't what disturbed him.

The severed head's empty eyes stared up at him. He knew that face. The mole on the right earlobe. The compact, almost nonexistent nose. The front teeth, slightly broken where Takuro had punched him. The round eyes that looked like a shiba inu's when he smiled.

"...It's me?" Shun's raspy voice echoed off the walls.

That can't be. It's just impossible.

He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and looked inside the bag again. There was no doubt about it. That head, hatefully looking up at him, was definitely his.

"No way..."

Shun slumped to the floor. The cardboard boxes Takuro had brought in contained Shun's dismembered corpse.

Chapter 13

NEXT STAGE

1

Shun's memories came flooding back in an instant. The dam had burst.

Earlier in the day, Shun had been sitting peacefully in the hills behind the school when Takuro suddenly appeared. He'd torn Shun's bag away from him and thrown it callously into the marsh. His computer game's program data, a letter from a friend at his old school, the shiba inu keychain Anna had given him... So many precious things were in that bag. He couldn't bear to lose it.

In a frantic state, Shun forgot that he couldn't swim. He almost instinctively jumped in the marsh to go after his bag and soon drowned. Whatever Takuro did after that, Shun wouldn't know. He was dead. But seeing his own corpse stuffed in cardboard boxes, he could roughly fill in the blanks.

Takuro must have panicked seeing Shun sink into the marsh. He probably went in after him and pulled him out. Maybe even tried to resuscitate him. But it was no use. However, it went without saying that the only reason someone like Takuro who had no regard for human life would try and save someone would be to save his own ass. When he'd ordered Shun to jump from a third-floor window the week before, he'd had a perfect alibi prepared in order to deflect all suspicion. But this was different. He hadn't predicted Shun's actions at all. He realized there could be trouble and panicked. A lot of adults must have seen him head out to the marsh. If Shun's corpse was discovered there, he would surely be a suspect.

So in order to cover up Shun's death, he hatched a plan to chop the body up into small pieces, stuff them in cardboard boxes, and transport them to the Jailhouse. It would be difficult on his own, but his father was the proprietor of a famous chain of hardware stores. He'd have no trouble finding the right tools.

Shun closed the bag and backed away from it. Takeshi, Anna, Takuro, Mika... Their gruesome deaths had completely paralyzed Shun's emotions, but seeing his own corpse was still unpleasant.

Shun ran, fleeing up the stairs and out of the basement. Collapsing to his knees on the tatami mats, he took deep breaths to calm himself and then

looked at his palms.

I didn't expect to be the first one dead.

He shook his head. There was no way he could just accept something so farfetched.

If I'm dead, what am I doing here now? I thought ghosts haunted dark, creepy places like graves or abandoned roads. I guess I was wrong...

Shun recalled what Anna said to him.

"Maybe it's because I took a tiny step into the world beyond, but ever since the accident, I... I've been able to see lots of things."

Does that mean...

"But whenever I'm about to, I start shivering and it's like all the blood in my body freezes. I've been feeling that sensation since the moment I laid eyes on the Jailhouse walls. Normally it's not like that... I think something mysterious definitely snuck in here."

It wasn't the monster's presence that she'd picked up on. Her sixth sense was responding to Shun, who was no longer of this world.

...I'm really a ghost?

Shun shook his head vigorously.

It can't be true. No way. My heart's beating so fast. My body's not translucent. And I can pick up this key just fine.

"If a spirit can open doors, maybe it can do things like clean too. It's not like we know what their habits are or what they're capable of."

Wait a minute...

It finally dawned on him that he'd only ever really had a conversation with Anna since coming to the mansion.

Did they... not know I was there?

As Shun thought back through what had happened, it seemed weirder and weirder. All the signs pointed to him having some kind of otherworldly existence. And with the evidence mounting against him, he had no choice but to

accept it.

He'd lost count of how many times Takuro had tortured him. In order to be able to bear the inhuman cruelties inflicted on him, he'd learned to bottle up his negative emotions. Those pent-up emotions exploded the moment he drowned, creating this world in the likeness of his game. At least, that was his theory.

"Enough..." Shun closed his eyes and muttered. He understood everything now. "Takuro is dead, so let's end this. I don't want to get any more innocent people mixed up in this. Hiroshi... Hiroshi said the game I made was interesting. If I'd lived, I bet he'd have been a good friend. So... So please... At least let Hiroshi go home. Return us to our own world."

Shun slowly opened his eyes. He'd hoped everything would just disappear, but nothing at all had changed.

"What do I do?" he half-sobbed, half-whispered.

There were only two outcomes in the game: game over or game cleared—in other words, getting killed by the monster or safely escaping. Shun may have been the creator of this world, but he had no control over the monster once it was set loose.

"Please... someone end this game."

All Shun could do now was pray with all his might. But... Then he suddenly felt the presence of someone nearby and lifted his head.

"...Who's there?"

Before Shun's eyes stood Hiroshi. How long he'd been there, Shun wasn't sure. Hiroshi squatted down and inspected one of the tatami mats.

"I'm sorry, Hiroshi."

Shun knew he couldn't hear him, but he had to apologize.

"Everything's my fault. Takeshi, Takuro, Mika, Anna... I killed them all. I know an apology won't fix it, but... I'm sorry. Hiroshi, I thought we could be friends. I'm sorry I got you mixed up in this too."

Tears streamed down Shun's face, tumbling onto Hiroshi's jacket that he was

still holding tightly with his right hand. Hiroshi leaned forward, touched the moist spots on his jacket, and cocked his head slightly.

“...Tears?” he breathed.

Shun’s eyes went wide.

“You can see these tears too? How? I’m not of this world anymore...”

Shun didn’t really understand the logic, but the tears he’d shed were undeniably real. That Hiroshi could see them was proof. But the surprises weren’t over. The most unexpected words of all came out of Hiroshi’s mouth next.

“Is that you, Shun?”

“What... did you say?”

“If you’re there, please answer me. Are you around?”

“...You can’t see me, can you?”

Shun tried waving his hand in front of Hiroshi’s face, but there was no reaction. He then tried poking his right cheek. With a shocked look on his face, Hiroshi reached out and grabbed Shun’s hand.

“So you are here.”

Hiroshi’s cheeks slackened just a little. Was he smiling?

“Answer me, please. Is this you, Shun? Poke my right cheek for yes and my left cheek for no.”

“Y-Yes.”

Shun poked Hiroshi’s right cheek and could see him smile. He’d never seen such a kind look in his eyes. Shun found himself smiling too.

“Are you wondering how I knew it was you even though I can’t see or hear you?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“It was the calluses on your right thumb and index finger. I realized it when you grabbed my arm and dragged me to the basement. All the strange

phenomena that's happened here very closely resembles the game you made."

No way... The calluses on my fingers?

"You really are amazing, Hiroshi," Shun whispered, wiping tears from his eyes.

"You brought my jacket up from the basement, did you? Thank you very much."

"Oh, no, it was nothing. You ripped your shirt up, so I thought you'd be cold running around like that."

Shun picked up the jacket and held it out to him. A look of shock came over Hiroshi's face, but it was only natural. From his perspective, the jacket appeared to move on its own.

"I still don't know why I can't see you though. The right arm I found on the second floor had the same calluses, which leads me to suspect that you've left your physical body and now exist in some sort of ethereal form. It's... all quite unscientific, but so much has happened that can't be explained with the knowledge I have. I've seen with my very eyes doors opening on their own and keys floating in the air, so I must accept it," Hiroshi said, slipping into his jacket. "I'd always believed that there was nothing science couldn't explain. No, that's not really true. I suppose it's more that whenever I encountered something that couldn't be explained, I simply chose to ignore what I was feeling. The human heart is the most difficult thing for me to understand, you see. Perhaps that's just how I came to be after being raised by parents who only appeared to be perfect when others were around. They'd seem so intimate, but the second they were alone, out came the curses and fighting. Yet they sacrificed themselves for me even though we were not particularly close, just like Mika did..."

Hiroshi paused there for a second, wiped his eye with a fingertip, then continued.

"From now on, even if I can't explain it with science, I won't shy away anymore. I'll dive into whatever it is head first."

As Hiroshi took his glasses off and was wiping the fogged-up lenses, the monster appeared at the entrance to the room.

“Look out! Behind you!”

Shun pulled on Hiroshi’s arm and stood up. That seemed to tip Hiroshi off as to what was happening.

“I have a ton of questions, but it seems ending this game comes first,” Hiroshi said, swiftly putting his glasses back on. “Will you help me escape?”

“Of course.”

Shun poked Hiroshi’s right cheek and pressed the key he’d taken from the basement into his hand.

“Let’s see. If we’re following the game, this key unlocks the second-floor parlor. There I’ll find a secret code on the piano’s keyboard. Then I’ll proceed to the study, where I can put that four-digit code into a safe to obtain the attic key. Do I have that right?”

His recollection of the game was impressive for someone who’d only played it a few times. Hiroshi’s memory was really something else.

But it was no time to celebrate. The blue monster slunk lazily over to them. Suddenly its right middle finger dropped off with a sickening popping sound. It flopped around on the floor, changed shape, and transformed into an entirely different creature. It looked like the rats that had congregated around Takeshi’s corpse. The other fingers followed suit, dropping to the floor and turning into more blue rats.

The monster then scratched at its face, and the peeled off skin that transformed into grasshoppers. And that wasn’t all. Its already bulging arm muscles swelled into a snake monster. Flesh separated from its head became a gelatinous, mollusk-like creature. A cuboid entity crawled out of its chest and became a monster with countless fine, sharp fangs. In mere seconds, the southern-facing first floor hall was filled with multiple creatures that had all sprung from the original monster.

Shun gulped at the nightmarish spectacle. Every monster shared the same blue skin and giant eyes. The ooze-like monster was covered with more than thirty such eyes, all looking in different directions.

“Whoa. So it’s hard mode from now on, huh?”

Giving the multiplying monsters a sidelong glance, Hiroshi shrugged slightly.

“Well, all right. A higher difficulty setting just makes winning that much more satisfying.”

Hiroshi turned to Shun and smiled.

“Now, Shun, let’s beat this game.”

“Yeah.”

Shun took that as the signal to start running and kicked off hard against the straw mat. The many monsters’ eyes all followed them as they ran. Shun slipped through the clamoring monsters and hurried to the stairs. The hideous blue creatures quickly gave chase. But he couldn’t stop. He couldn’t hesitate. Fighting them was not an option.

Run. Run and run some more.

He told himself over and over again just to keep moving forward.

If you keep running, you can surely make it to the next stage.

How many times had he played this game? He knew it like the back of his hand. Plus, he was working with Hiroshi, the smartest kid in their year. They were pretty much unstoppable.

Hiroshi would be able to figure out the randomly generated password in a matter of seconds. And Shun could almost perfectly predict when and where the monsters would appear. Pulling on Hiroshi’s hand, he guided him along. If Hiroshi stumbled, Shun was right there to lend him a shoulder. And when they stumbled upon something unexpected and Shun became flustered, Hiroshi’s flexible mind and quick thinking got them back on track.

It was a fraught run, but they finally reached the attic room. Grabbing the key on the wall, they made their way back down the stairs to the entrance hall, tightly holding hands all the while. The great mass of monsters followed them the whole way, but there was nothing to fear. There was calm in their hearts.

“Let’s go,” Hiroshi said as he unlocked the door and smiled at Shun.

“Okay,” Shun said with an emphatic nod as he gave the door a push.

The door swung open for them. Shun had to squint his eyes in the bright light of sunshine and victory.



2

A flurry of fanfare resounded as the word “clear” flashed across his laptop screen.

“Done,” Hiroshi commented in his usual monotone voice as he pushed up his glasses.

“...Huh?”

Confused, Shun looked around. He and Hiroshi were sitting in the hills behind school like usual. He checked his watch and discovered that, somehow, time had reversed. The laptop Takuro had destroyed was just fine and the bag that had sunk to the bottom of the marsh was slung snugly over his shoulder.

What is this? I don't understand.

He had the silliest look on his face.

“What’s the matter?” Hiroshi asked, peering suspiciously at Shun.

“Oh, uh... It’s nothing.”

Shun smiled and tried to cover it up. It was the only way for him to react.

“So... What do you think?”

“The controls feel all right, and the graphics and sound suit the ambiance of the world perfectly. I didn’t expect it to be so polished. It was so fun that I was able to fully immerse myself in it.”

Hiroshi repeated his lines from that afternoon.

“But I wonder about naming the characters after our classmates. All three get brutally murdered, so it will certainly come off as distasteful.”

“Oh... Yeah. You’re right.”

Shun was too confused to respond properly to the honest feedback.

Was I just daydreaming about the game?

Shun had to wonder. It made more sense that way, but Takuro appeared after Hiroshi left. Just the same way he had before. That was too much of a

coincidence. So had he really gone back in time? A heavy blow struck him in the back of the head and he collapsed, stopping him from thinking about it further.

“Remember in geography class how we learned about cultures that practice geophagia? I just couldn’t believe it, man. I mean, it’s dirt you’re eating. There’s no way that tastes good. But I have to admit I am curious. So, new kid... Test it out for me, will you?”

Takuro ground his shoe into Shun’s head. His cheek scraped against the ground. The taste of blood spread through his mouth.

If he just sat and took it, the same fate was bound to befall him. He had to avoid that at all costs.

“Raaahhhhh!” Shun screamed and jumped up.

Takuro couldn’t have expected him to resist. He lost his balance and fell onto his butt, looking like an utter fool.

“What the hell?”

His expression darkened by the second. Shun hugged his laptop to his chest, turned on his heels, and took off running.

“Hey, come back here!” Takuro angrily yelled after him. “You’re gonna pay for this! Just you wait! I’ll make you regret defying me!”

The normal Shun would have stopped, frozen in fear. But there was nothing to be scared of now. Compared to the blue monster in the Jailhouse, Takuro was like a cute baby. In fact, Shun was relieved to see him alive and well.

Slipping through the trees, Shun continued to run. Before he knew it, he was smiling. Time was beginning to move in a different direction from the future he’d already experienced once. Takuro and his gang wouldn’t be killed now.

But that didn’t mean Shun’s normal life would change dramatically. He’d probably still be bullied. He’d probably even be worse off for what he’d just done. But Shun felt he could bear it. There was no need to take his own life just because he was suffering. Every problem has a solution. Even if his friends and family offered no assistance, even if not even a single person extended a helping hand... he could always run away. But not from living.

If he was going to be bullied forever, he could skip school. If hanging out with his friends became depressing, he could shut himself up in his room. If he grew tired of studying, he could simply stop. There were plenty of escape routes other than death. And if the day came that he knew he was down to his last resort, he now knew he'd have the courage to fight back.

It'll be okay. There's always a way out.

Shun nodded to himself. If life was a game, he was determined to beat it. It was then he realized he was standing in front of the stone walls of the Jailhouse.

"What's the matter? You're pouring sweat."

Shun heard a sweet, familiar voice and turned around. Anna was looking at him, clearly surprised to see him. She was carrying a bag in her right hand with the name of her cram school emblazoned across the front.

"Anna," Shun said between ragged breaths. "On your way to cram school? Study hard!"

He was so happy to see her alive that he naturally began to babble.

"And hey, if you've got something on your mind, don't keep it bottled inside. You can talk to me. I might be able to help."

"...Huh?" Anna cocked her head quizzically.

Shoot. I went a little too far and said something I shouldn't have.

"No, it's nothing. Just talking to myself," Shun blurted out, trying to backpedal.

"You sure seem cheerful today. Did something happen?"

"Nope. I'm happy because nothing's happened."

Anna looked even more confused at his response.

"Well, don't let me hold you up. You'll be late for cram school. See ya!"

"Oh... Yeah, see you," Anna said, confused.

Just then, a butterfly landed on her shoulder.

“It’s rare to see them this time of year,” she said with a smile.

The butterfly’s wings were the color of blueberries.



Afterword

Western or Japanese, I love horror films. The simpler the setting, the better. I totally clear my mind and stuff my mouth with popcorn as I watch the characters onscreen run from murderers and evil spirits with trepidation and excitement. It's pure bliss. But fear is like your sense of smell—the more you're exposed to a stimulus, the duller it becomes. Simply eerie works become not enough. We seek more and more stimulation until we feel the greatest fear from things that are one step away from belonging in a gag movie and go, "What the heck?" Human feelings are truly a mystery.

The computer game *Ao Oni* created by noprops is exactly that kind of "one step away from comedy" work, and that is why it's so scary. When I was asked to do the novelization, I jumped on it, but the truth is I was unsure how to capture this kind of fear in words. Karin Suzuragi, who handled the illustrations, was a huge help and I feel like we were able to somehow replicate the terror of the game, but... What do you think? The novel of *Ao Oni* is based on the 3.0 patch, but is an original story and adds two new characters. That said, I tried to make it my own while still keeping with the game's aesthetic. The meaning of which... I hope you'll understand if you read to the end. For those whose first experience with *Ao Oni* is on a bookshelf, I implore you to try the game, which takes place from Hiroshi's point of view. There's nothing wrong with expanding your *Ao Oni* horizons.

But in true horror movie fashion—think *Damian*, *Jason*, *Jigsaw*, *Sadako*—the monsters always power up in the sequels to give people a second scare. There are still many mysteries left in *Ao Oni*, and there are a lot of iconic scenes I couldn't fit in this novel. If I have the opportunity, I'd like to write new adventures with Shun, Hiroshi, and the rest of the gang.

So here's to hoping we meet again.

Kenji Kuroda

Difference in Faces



Congratulations on the novelization of Ao Oni! And thank you for letting me work on the illustrations! The characters Mr. Kuroda wrote were so lovely that I was excited to draw them. Mika especially was just too cute. Oh, Mika... I originally played Ao Oni in the version 3.0 era and watched videos of the others as they came out. As the versions evolved, the slight differences in production added new fun and fear to the playthroughs. Especially that one scene from 6.0. I was so shocked. I'm so grateful to noprops, Mr. Kuroda, and my editor. I look forward to further developments in Ao Oni and future works from both creators!



Karin Suzuragi

INITIAL DESIGN GALLERY

These designs were all done specifically for this book. This gallery showcases the first draft of each one. As you can see, their outfits and such differ from the final versions.





MIKA



HIROSHI



NAOKI



ANNA



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Ao Oni

by Kenji Kuroda

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